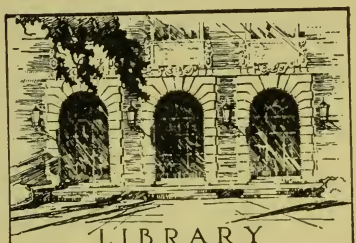

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VOL. III.

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THE MILL WHEEL.

CHAPTER I.

The life at Fern Cottage was quiet enough, and I think old Miss Trufit and the black cat enjoyed it the most. But there came a change one day in September. Renie was putting some grapes and peaches in a dish that had come from "Chiverton." The Helrings were not selfish with their good things, like a great many.

Christie entered.

"Please ma'am, Mr. Chalmers wishes to see you."

Renie had thought she heard the gate click, but she had not turned round.

In the pretty cool drawing-room sat Mr. Chalmers.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Chalmers; you make your visits too scarce."

"Well, it's pleasant to be told that, Miss Rudkin. You are not looking quite well; are you troubled? Anything I can do for you?"

"No, thank you. I feel quite strong. I have been looking old lately, they tell me, and no doubt that is the change you see. Of course nothing has been heard of Mr. Gunstan?"

"Indeed, but there has; that is what brings me here. I knew you would be glad to hear it. I had a letter from him yesterday. He is in Liverpool; just arrived in the 'Russia' from China. I have been searching and advertising all over the world nearly for the last fifteen months, but I never tried

China. However, he made the discovery of his good fortune in the hotel the night he landed by means of a paper, and at once wrote to me. I never felt so relieved in my life, Miss Rudkin; and I am sure you must. I will just step over to the place and tell Mrs. Troost of her master's arrival. He should follow his letter in a day or two, he said."

Renie heaved a great sigh of relief.

"Yes, I am relieved, Mr. Chalmers; and now that the old place has again a master I hope things may be more fortunate. What a pity we did not try China."

"Oh, these things cannot be helped, you see. I wonder what took the man there; there is no accounting for taste. And how is Miss Trufit?"

"Very well indeed; she enjoys excellent health. I don't think she is in; she is always trotting over to see either Addy or Lucy. Do you want to go to Zeigleheath now?"

"Yes, I must return by the 9.20 train. Perhaps you would not mind the walk; I should enjoy it more."

"Yes, I will go. I am sorry, for your sake, not my own, that I cannot drive you there."

"Should you like a carriage, then, Miss Rudkin?"

"Oh, dear no. I don't aspire to anything half so grand. I am content with what I have. I daresay I might have liked one once, but I have got over all those desires now. I'll send you some refreshment to take while I go and get my hat on. I don't think all the birds are eaten that Norman sent; at any rate I hope not for your sake again."

The walk was pleasant enough under those fine old trees with the smell of the sea blowing through them so fresh and keen.

Mr. Chalmers stopped more than once to admire the fine bits of scenery Renie pointed out to him.

"Gunstan is a lucky dog to step into this place."

Renie made no reply; it was rather a sore subject with her the estate devolving into strange hands.

The sun was pouring down on the closed windows, and the gardens, though neat, were not decked with choice flowers; every expense had been curtailed, waiting the pleasure of its master. They knocked at the thick door, and had some time to stand before Mrs. Troost came.

"Lord save us! Miss Renie; and—Mr. Chalmers? Why did you not get Jack to run round? he is at work somewhere here."

"Oh, never mind, Mrs. Troost; we have important news to impart, so it is befitting we should enter by the front door."

"Well, please step in, Miss Renie; you looks pale enough at any rate."

Mr. Chalmers turned sharply.

"I ought not to have asked you to come, Miss Rudkin, in this heat; it was very thoughtless of me."

"My paleness is only Mrs. Troost's fancy, Mr. Chalmers."

But Mrs. Troost was right, Renie was as white as chalk. The lawyer said no more, but sat down in the vestibule and stared along the cool hall.

"You won't be alone much longer, Mrs. Troost; Mr. Gunstan has turned up."

Down sat the plump dame.

"Now, really, as I often remarks to Frost, there's no cheating the ways of Providence. Him to come after all. Well, I hope it may be all right now; he's neither an old man nor a child, perhaps he'll keep. Anyways, *you've* had a sorry time of it, Miss Renie; this place has brought nought but trouble to you. And when does my master come, sir?"

"In a few days, I expect; get everything

in readiness, Mrs. Troost, he won't be long—he is in England already."

"Then I must set to work at once. Mr. Chalmers, I may make bold to say before you and my young lady, that if it was not for the time I have served in this house I would go to-morrow. I don't like the looks of Mr. Gunstan, and never did. But I cannot reconcile myself to go and leave Miss Renie and Miss Addy."

The man of law looked amazed.

"I never should have thought it, Mrs. Troost; Mr. Gunstan, what little I saw of him, struck me as being a very agreeable man."

"Likely enough, Mr. Chalmers; but we had him here some time, and I don't think anyone was sorry to see him go."

Mr. Chalmers said nothing, nor did Renie; she considered the least said the soonest mended. They looked round the house, saw old Frost, and then went away.

Mr. Chalmers tried to draw Renie out on the subject of Mr. Gunstan, but she was too prudent and would say nothing, either for or against. Besides, it was rather too cold and wild a story to submit to a lawyer, and Lucy was the one best acquainted with it. They spent the intervening time at the cottage, and then Mr. Chalmers set off to the station.

The return of Leopold Gunstan caused a slight commotion throughout the place, and Lucy ran as soon as she heard of it to digest the news with Renie.

"There! never mind stopping, Renie, I only came to chatter about the lost man," said the young Countess, dropping into a chair.

"Well, you see I'm right, he was not dead. I never believe in such men dying, the devil has not done with him yet. We shall see what sort of a life he will lead now that he is a rich man and a baronet. Sir Leopold Gunstan Rudkin, it sounds well!"

"Very, and doubtless he will marry well, and live in grand style. It is curious how things have come round, Lucy. I never dreamt, when that man came to stay there, that he would so soon be master. Well, one must little wish for riches, they are not happiness—at least what I have seen of them. You are happy though, Lucy?"

"Yes, indeed! but then Carl is so good and kind. I should not fret if we got poor to-morrow, as long as I had him. The only thing I care to have money for is to help others. I can now assist mamma with the boys, and that is a great thing. By-the-way, Carry has had an offer from some young doctor, but she will not leave mamma. Have you heard from Rufus Sebastain lately, Renie?"

"Yes, I had a letter this morning, but not a long one. He is now in Strasburg, and doing pretty well, he says. I hope he may get on; he has plenty of talent, if he will only

use it. But there are always so many contrary inclinations and temptations for good-looking young men like Rufus. I trust he won't get friendly with any great nob, else good-bye to work, it will be all pleasure!"

It was a pity Renie could not have seen the artist just then. He was hard at work painting a German banker's wife, with a sad distressed face that made the happy young creature tell her husband that she was quite sure the young man was poor, and they must get him plenty of work. The husband was quite ready to do anything his wife told him, and the very next day asked Rufus Sebastain if he could lend him any money.

"No, thank you," replied the artist, "only pay me directly I have completed madame's picture."

The German shrugged his shoulders and went off. Rufus Sebastain meant to try hard and get into no difficulties or under any

obligations. But he did not get any fatter, and his face became fearfully white.

Young madame then told her big husband that the poor fellow was in a decline, and distressed him dreadfully.

However, since Rufus repelled all advances, they could do nothing but keep him employed without hurting his feelings.

Zeigleheath presented a totally different aspect. The blinds were up, and flowers graced the beds by the windows, while a pretty little pony drew the mowing machine in and out among the trees.

CHAPTER II.

On the Tuesday the new baronet arrived, and the following morning made his appearance at Fern Cottage and requested to see Miss Rudkin.

The request surprised Renie, for it was not to be expected when one remembered their parting. He was, if anything, handsomer, for there was an amount of easy indifference which sat well with him. His pocket was full and his mind at rest. He was dressed in admirable taste, and everything of the best quality. He was standing staring at the

homely garden when Renie entered. He turned with a smile and outstretched hand.

"I hope you are well, Miss Rudkin, and that time has softened your heart towards me?"

Renie shook hands as she replied—

"Yes, I am well, Sir Leopold, and as for the state of my heart, it is exactly the same. I cannot tell you to do more than leave this cottage, and that is scarcely worth while. The tables are turned now, Sir Leopold."

"Yes, they are, and I hope you will let bye-gones be bye-gones, and treat me kindly. I don't suppose I am welcome?"

"No, I don't suppose you are. Every one is used to the Rudkins; it will take time to forget."

He smiled the old satisfied smile, and sat down near to Renie, who wished he would take himself off. But he showed no sign of moving.

"It is useless our speaking of changes,

Miss Rudkin, I see so many, but not a greater in any than you. Well, I too am changed. Shall we not be friends, Miss Rudkin? I think of marrying shortly, and I should like you to be kind to my wife."

He asked it very earnestly, and Renie eyed him sharply.

"I have no objection to be friends, Sir Leopold, such as the friendship will be. And I am sure it will be Lady Gunstan's own fault if she is not kindly received. People about here are well enough disposed. I presume you know that Miss Northwood is now Countess Helring?"

"Yes; Mrs. Troost entertained me with a full dish of gossip after I arrived last evening. I had not before heard the particulars of the untimely death of the little heir."

The Baronet was waiting for Renie to say something, but she could not talk to him of Rodney! little innocent lamb!

"How did you like China?" asked she, breaking the somewhat awkward pause.

"Very well; I sailed immediately I left this locality. It was one of the few places I had not seen. I went to the diamond fields some years ago, and I fancy that was the pleasantest trip I ever took."

"Did you get many stones?"

"Yes, a good number, but there is a flaw in nearly all the Cape diamonds. This one—holding out his ring—was the only perfect one amongst the batch. It is certainly all a myth about making money out of them, or I should have made some."

A little more talk and he rose.

"I am going to call upon Mrs. Howard and the Countess, and renew old acquaintance. I should like you to come to Zeigleheath whenever you feel disposed, Miss Rudkin; don't allow my presence to scare you. Remember me kindly to Miss Trufit."

He walked down the lane with the same erect figure, and swinging step peculiar to him, and Renie came to the conclusion that he must have discovered the elixir of life during his travels, for he appeared no older.

He managed to get himself into favour, and had bachelors' parties, and picnics for the ladies, before he had hardly got settled.

The stables were once more full of horses, more fancy animals than old Sir Bevis had ever kept. And the new possessor was to be seen driving or riding some great wonder every day. He was liberal too, and placed the carriages at Miss Rudkin's disposal, and sent every day fruits and flowers down to the Cottage.

It rather mystified Renie, but when she spoke to him, and said she preferred not having them, he looked excessively hurt, and said they were hers as long as he had them, and if she did not care to use them herself

she could give them to the poor—that he did not know how to manage such things.

Amongst the visitors at Zeigleheath was one *fixture*, I may almost say—Doctor Bacup. He nearly lived there, and it was wonderful how he came out. He moved into a larger house, though his wife had no family, and set up a brougham in addition to his gig. His practice must have increased, at any rate at Zeigleheath.

Sir Leopold was not deemed quite well; his constitution had suffered with being so much abroad, and the care Doctor Sibley Bacup took of him was truly praiseworthy.

On the 4th of October a little baby saw light at Chiverton. It was a wonderfully pretty little baby that, with its clear soft skin, and head covered with lightest down. To Lucy's great joy it had not its papa's large ears, and I believe he shared her joy, for he fingered them every day, and marched up and

down with this infant, greatly to the disgust of the stiff monthly nurse. But who cared for the prim sour old thing? Certainly not Carl or Lucy. *They* were perfectly happy with each other, and the baby, who, according to their accounts, was a marvel. It certainly was droll to see the pretty little thing stiffen its back and set up as erect as a soldier on its papa's arm, while mamma tickled its pink toes.

The day it was born the Count ran about and told everyone "We have got the baby." He asked every third person to be godmother, but it had long ago been settled that Renie was to have that post, also the choosing of its name; but the overjoyed Count had forgotten everything in the excitement. It was a girl, and Renie selected Miriam Ruth for its name, which pleased Carl greatly.

"It is the prettiest name I have heard for many a day, is it not, Lucy, my dear?"

"Yes, I left it to Renie; she always had a *taste* for names. I knew she would pick a nice one, one to blend with Helring. Miriam Ruth Helring; yes, it is perfect. And now, Renie, Carl has got some news to tell, which, I fancy, will astonish you; it did me. Tell it, Carl, and don't kiss baby any more, she does not like it."

"Doesn't she? Let me see; one, two, three. There now, she does, little cherub. Well, the news is that Sir Leopold is going to be married; he told me so this morning."

"Oh, that is no news to me, Count, for he told me the first time he called. It is to no one in this part of the country, or we should have heard."

"That's what I said to Lucy, but she has got too wise to listen to me since the baby came."

Lucy did certainly appear wide awake as she glanced at Renie half smiling.

"Don't let us speculate, but wait and see,

my dear Renie; I have my own ideas on the subject."

"So I suppose, and so have I. I only hope whoever it is she won't have cause to repent. Zeigleheath is kept pretty full of visitors, so Mrs. Troost told Christie the other evening; different to when we were there, Lucy?"

"Yes; do you remember our going to the gipsies' camp, Renie? By-the-way, do you know we never told our fortunes last autumn, and the hag said we might?"

"No, we never did; you can tell yours now though."

"And so can you."

"No, Lucy, I cannot, my fortune was not a happy one, and I would rather not tell it to you, dear."

"Well, have your own way and you'll live the longer, I suppose. She told the truth and no mistake, much as people laugh at gipsies. She told me I should marry a German gentleman close to here."

"Did she though? Then that accounts for you treating it so coolly when I made you the offer; you had been expecting it."

"Slightly; don't look cross, dear; if you had not asked me I should have asked you. I don't see why that may not be done; do you, Renie?"

"No; but I assuredly should not like to do it, Lucy. And now I must set off; Addy and Norman are coming to us to-night."

She declined the Count's escort home, and went her way.

But Renie was fated not to perform the distance in solitary bliss; some little way beyond Chiverton gates she saw Sir Leopold Gunstan Rudkin coming strolling along, smoking a cigar, and accompanied by a couple of dogs, each valued at forty pounds.

He seemed pleased to see her, and coolly turned back with her.

"This is 'well met,' Miss Rudkin; I wanted to see you, and I did not care to go

to Fern Cottage, because that elderly party is always knitting in one corner, and you never ask me into your painting room. Will you paint me a few pictures? Anything you like."

"Yes; I have no objection, but you have already a good collection, amongst which mine would appear trash."

"Don't fear for the family credit, I have plenty of spare place for yours. And that one the Count has is really good. But I have something else to say to you which will, no doubt, amaze you. I am going to be married."

"On the contrary, I am prepared for it; you forget you told me yourself, and, independently of that, the Count has just informed me."

"Indeed; then to be 'forewarned is to be forearmed.' You do not ask the lady's name, Miss Rudkin."

"No, I should scarcely presume so much,

Sir Leopold; you can tell me though, if you choose."

"And I don't choose. No offence, Miss Rudkin; but I don't intend to tell anyone; there may be some little disagreeables, and for that reason I wanted to see you. I want you to protect my wife with your countenance."

"That is a strange request, Sir Leopold, and I don't feel justified in making any promise till I see the lady. Is there anything that requires support, that you ask it?"

He gnawed his moustache and hesitated.

"No, Miss Rudkin, nothing! she is pretty, sweet tempered, and a lady. But she has no family or friends, and society sometimes takes queer notions. You are able to turn the scale should it go against her; one word will be sufficient from you to put things straight. I know you never liked me, Miss Rudkin,

and I never saw you show dislike for another, therefore I trust you may ere long perceive your error and be friends with me. I can assure you I have the highest respect and regard for you, and earnestly desire to see you and my wife friends."

"I need scarcely say you have astonished me, your request seems hardly in keeping. Had you gone to Mrs. Howard or the Countess, I could have understood it better, but I rarely go out, and never receive any but intimate friends; have only a small income improved by working. I am no influential person, and yet you ask me, who reside in a little cottage, to take Lady Gunstan Rudkin by the hand. It is really ridiculous, Sir Leopold."

"No, it is not; and that you will quickly see when I bring my wife home; you are the one to help her, as I said before. But I take your silence for consent, Miss Rudkin, and

need say no more. I shall get married almost directly, and very quietly. I don't want any display. Are you angry with me ?"

He was peering into her face narrowly.

"No, why should I be ? Remember, I have made no promise. I certainly shall not immediately set about disliking your wife, but I cannot declare friendship on such equally unreasonable terms. I require to see people before I can form any opinion of them."

He was gnawing his moustache again, and the fat pugs, like their master, seemed uneasy in their minds, for they took to snapping and snarling at each other with their heads on one side like game cocks.

"Well, Miss Rudkin, I know you have not promised, so I will only ask you to be just, and merciful to faults and failings. And forgive and forget if there should occur anything to need it !"

Renie laughed.

"You have no doubt meant well, Sir Leopold, but you have accomplished your work wretchedly. Had you said nothing, I should have expected nothing ; as it is you have roused my interest and sharpened my senses to the discovery of the slightest peculiarity in your wife. In common justice to her, and from a pardonable desire to erase any weakness of my own sex, let me entreat of you not to go talking to anyone else, or soliciting their protection in the manner you have done mine, or you will have them all by the ears watching her with microscopes."

He started.

" You are right, as usual, a safe one to talk to. I thank you, Miss Rudkin, for the hint, but you are the only one I want help from. And I see, though you are not spasmodic in your attachments, you are willing to be just. Here we are at your little box, so I will say

good-bye. I shall not be a single man when next I grasp your hand. Won't you reach over your dislike and wish me well?"

"I wish you well, Sir Leopold, and much happiness. Will you come in and see us? Mr. and Mrs. Howard will be here shortly."

"No, thank you, Miss Rudkin, not this evening. Good-bye."

He turned off, and Renie stood, the latch of the little gate in her hand, looking after him. She was not at all clear about the affair, and he was different this afternoon to what he had ever been. What he was about to do remained to be seen, but it was pretty evident he was not quite easy or satisfied about it himself. Men do sometimes take strange fancies; could it be a *mésalliance* he was about to contract, a marriage with some pretty barmaid? If so, the Countess was strangely at fault in her estimation of his character.

"Well," thought Renie to herself, as she walked up to the green door between the grass and flowers which smelt so sweetly, "he has plenty of time to weigh the matter, and he is old enough to have judgment; if he makes himself miserable for the remainder of his stay in this world after steering clear of matrimony all these years, he is a fool for his pains, and richly deserving of whatever he gets."

The marriage of the owner of Zeigleheath got wind, as those things always will do, and it was no news to anyone in a few hours. A fortnight elapsed, during which an event, attended with no small distress, occurred at Beach Cliff, namely the death of that educated little dog Minnie. She caught cold, poor wee thing, and died, spite of the copious tears shed by Mrs. Howard and Isabella, which I can't help thinking was rather ungrateful of her. Well, it is no use getting poetical over

a member of the canine race, or letting one's feelings smother one's common sense, but I will shock Christianity so far as to say, if there *is* a place of happiness after death for good intelligent dogs, little woolly Minnie's there, queen of them all.

CHAPTER III.

HALF-PAST twelve, towards the close of an October day, and Renie was leaning out of the little room window, singing softly to herself. She had never been blessed with a powerful voice, and of late the little she had possessed was almost gone. Dr. Owen told her it was over-work and anxiety. Renie smiled; then it must go, she could never earn anything with that organ, and she could with her brush. Nevertheless it was a trial, for no girl likes to see a charming accomplishment

slipping surely through her fingers. And then she could ill spare it, she had so few, and it is nice to be able to gladden others as well as ourselves.

Ah! it is little use wishing or murmuring, we must part with all someday; better enjoy life while we are able, the close comes too soon for a good many, and not soon enough for others. I don't know that Renie singing to herself in her poor weakened voice would have suffered many, if any, pangs of regret had she been commanded to put it by for ever and go home.

Her life had not been a joyous one; she was prematurely old, and I don't believe God was displeased with her when she said—

"I am nearly twenty-one, and if all my life is to be like what I have had, anyone is welcome to the rest of it."

He knew what she had suffered, and how she had tried, and if she was not wedded to this life no wonder, and maybe that was what

He wanted. Anyway I do not think He will be angry with her or refuse her admittance when she stands knocking at the City Gate.

The garden, with its bit of orchard and meadows beyond, was very quiet, and Renie might have heard a footfall, only that the grass was long and thick. She did not spend much on her garden, and just now she was thinking of the state of her purse. But she was effectually roused by a call of

"Miss Renie! Miss Renie!"

There, close to her, stood old Frost.

"How are you, Frost? It is not often you pay me a visit, won't you come in? Go round and I'll open the door for you."

Frost never moved, only smiled and bowed his snowy head.

"No, no, thank you, Miss Renie, I had better be going back. But I just stepped over to ask you to come up, you are wanted."

"Indeed! by Mrs. Troost, I suppose? I

hope it is nothing of consequence; if so you had better telegraph to Sir Leopold, I had rather not interfere. But I'll follow you shortly."

The old man turned and shuffled off, and Renie drew in her head.

"What can be amiss now, that Mrs. Troost wants me, I wonder? Well, I shall stay and take my dinner, it is almost one, and walk over after."

"Are you going to the village, dear?" asked Miss Trufit, as Renie neared the door.

"No, Miss Trufit, I am going to make a call. I shall most likely not be back much before half-past five. If you go to see Addy, please tell her from me that I have decided not to have that dress, I cannot afford it at present."

Miss Priscilla shook her head when alone. She and Mrs. Howard both agreed that Renie was getting dreadfully mean and careless of

her appearance. But if Renie had any idea of this it did not distress her, and Miss Trufit and Addy were the furthest from her mind as she put on her quiet hat and took her umbrella out of the corner.

"I shall not trouble to go to the front door, Mrs. Troost is certain to be in her room."

But this plan was frustrated by the appearance of Frost on the steps. He bowed her in in great state with a most solemn face, and before Renie could prevent him he opened the morning room door and frigidly announced "Miss Rudkin." Renie was petrified; she had come to see Mrs. Troost, what ailed Frost?

There was a suppressed commotion as Sir Leopold advanced.

"This is kind of you, Miss Rudkin, to pay us this early visit. This is my wife, Lady Gunstan Rudkin."

The slight figure, in two shades of blue,

turned her face, studded with smiles. It was her uncle's widow, Lady Rudkin. This, then, asked countenance. A dead calm prevailed as the three stood facing each other. Renie's countenance of horror and contempt must have terrified the bride, for she burst into tears and buried her face in a pillow. This dissolved the spell, and Renie found her voice. It sounded strange enough to her own ears.

"You need not thank me for this early visit, Sir Leopold, it was not paid to either you or Lady Rudkin. I did not know of your return."

She understood it all now, Frost's mysterious errand; the old servants had been so astonished that they had sent for her to see who the new mistress was, and without a word shut them up together. It was a trick that under other circumstances than those existing would have made Renie laugh.

"We only arrived last night, Miss Rudkin,

by the last train. Say a few words to my wife, it is rather a trying position."

"Very, I should say; but Lady Rudkin is quite equal to it. Since she has advanced thus far she can go to the end without anyone's support."

"I asked you to have mercy and forget."

"I know you did, but that is scarcely possible, and I question whether you will find others any quicker at it than myself. I think you will be obliged to support each other, Sir Leopold."

"Stay, Miss Rudkin, don't desert us. Essy, get up and speak to Miss Rudkin! What are you crying for?"

Lady Rudkin lifted her tearful face, and replied, while dabbing her handkerchief repeatedly to her eyes—

"Because I knew how it would be, and Miss Rudkin looked *so—so* shocked!"

"I look what I feel in the same way as I

say what I think. I *am* shocked, Lady Rudkin, and very much so. It is not yet two years since you were here a widow and your present husband a guest. I wonder what my poor old uncle would say if he could rise out of the grave and see you two here, husband and wife? You will certainly cause a sensation in Moordart."

"But I was so lonely, and Sir Bevis treated me very badly. He left me only two hundred a year, and no power in anything. I don't think you need treat me so unkindly. I feel sure Mrs. Howard won't."

"I am not treating you unkindly. I would not take the trouble. Since you have lost all respect for yourself it is not my duty to find it for you. But though all may not be so candid in telling their opinions they are sure to have their thoughts. It is singular, Lady Rudkin. May I enquire how you managed to find each other?"

"We met by accident just after Leopold got to London at the Royal Academy. I was only too glad to escape from such a state of genteel poverty and the temper of my aunt. But I wanted Gunstan to sell this place, and he would not. I wish I had never been born?"

Renie smiled at this wise wish, and the new baronet turned rather bad-temperedly to his pretty wife and said—

"Esther, don't be ridiculous!"

Things seemed to be getting to that state which renders the presence of a third person embarrassing, so Renie took her departure, first shaking hands with Lady Rudkin, which delighted Sir Leopold. It was strange how much he wanted them to be friends, at least in the eyes of the world.

Renie had now no duty to perform. Her interest in Zeigleheath was at an end, and she did not wish to be the one to make them

quarrel with their bread and butter. She prognosticated that they would do it quite soon enough of their own accord. Moreover, she had no right to dictate to them; they were no more to her than any other lord and lady. Things had changed hands, and left her no place but that of an outsider. Her steps were bent to the housekeeper's parlour, and there she found that dame and Frost in deep debate. Mrs. Troost had evidently been weeping, and it was in a silent, melancholy manner that she set a chair for Renie.

"Miss Renie, I hope you'll excuse the liberty I took in getting you here this afternoon, but I thought for the family's credit you ought to know at once."

"I fancy we have got to the end of the family's credit, Mrs. Troost, but you did right to send for me, only I had rather Frost had told me before he shut me in with them."

"My dear lady, I could not; the words

would not come any more than in your garden this morning. I have not got right yet; when I opened the door for them last night, and saw her face, I thought I should have dropped."

"Yes, indeed, Miss Renie, Frost has not been himself since; he is wandering."

"No, I am not wandering; I know what I have got in my old head all right; only I am nigh mad with grief."

Sales shook him, and he cried like a baby.

"There now, you see, Miss Renie, for yourself; he has been like that all the morning, and not able to do a stroke of work."

"Frost," said Renie, putting her hand into the shrivelled, hard one that hung so helplessly by his side, "don't grieve any more; we cannot help these things, and it hurts me to see you cry."

"Yes, yes, I know it does, dear Miss Renie. But don't you mind me, maybe I'll

be better soon. If I could only be sure, if I could only get my dear, dear master out of his coffin to say yes or no, Frost, I could be quiet, but I think my heart will burst, I do, indeed."

The old man's hands were clenched, and the veins stood out under the white hair round his brow like cords. Mrs. Troost was wiping the drops of agony from his face again.

"You see, it is such a shock, Miss Renie, it has upset us. I wonder what the people will say. Dear me! dear me! such a disgrace I consider it, poor master dying in a fit—"

"Silence, Mrs. Troost, don't talk any more about master's death, it turns me sick. I—I—Oh, Lord!"

In his excitement he had started up, but fell into his chair again, with his head on the table, shivering as if with ague. Mrs. Troost kept her mouth open, as it had been ready to

form the next word when Frost's sudden outburst stopped her.

Renie was the first to recover from the surprise.

"Get him some brandy, Mrs. Troost, he is ill."

The mouth closed, and up jumped the old woman to get the brandy. A little in a wine glass revived him, and he sat up.

"You are better now, Frost?"

"Yes, thank you, Miss Renie," replied the old man, wiping his damp, white face.

"I shall send Doctor Owen to see you to-morrow, and I think you had better keep quiet. There are plenty to do the work without you."

"Plenty. I shall leave, Miss Renie; will you give me Mr. Chalmer's address, please?"

"Yes, certainly, Frost, but I cannot allow you to go till you are well; if you won't stop here come to me, there is room for you."

"Thank you, Miss Renie; but I don't

intend to leave here at present; only I will not serve Sir Leopold and Lady Rudkin."

"As you please, of course, Frost; and now I must go."

"Miss Renie, could you call and tell Mrs. Howard and the Countess who the bride is; it will be easier coming from you than a stranger, and the sooner it gets known the better. The servants are all new, with the exception of one or two, and I assure you, Miss Renie, they have just stood and chattered and gossiped all the morning over it."

"Well, we cannot stay their tongues, Mrs. Troost. Yes, I will go to Chiverton, but I don't think I have time to take Beach Cliff, and, as you say, the tale will soon get known."

When Renie arrived at Chiverton she was just in time to witness the interesting scene consequent upon Carl feeding baby under Lucy's directions. They were quite cosy all

by themselves, which was what the Count liked; when he did notice his child he banished the nurse, and took sole possession. He held a spoon in one hand, with which he fed Miriam Ruth, and then squeezed and kissed her. The child quite enjoyed it, and crowed in his face, and kicked out its little fat legs.

"Oh, here's godmamma come to see you, baby; sorry I cannot shake hands, but you perceive the difficulty—spoon in one, child in the other."

A few moments given to civilities, then Lucy asked—

"By-the-bye, has Sir Leopold and his wife returned, do you know?"

"Yes, they arrived last night; I have just come from Zeigleheath."

"Very prompt in your attentions—and is the bride a beauty?

"Yes, decidedly. But when I went I did not know they were at home; I was sent for

this morning by Mrs. Troost. They have all had a shock."

"A shock! Nothing serious, I hope?"

"Well, that is a question. Lucy, Sir Leopold's wife is the late—Lady Rudkin."

Lucy was mild with her astonishment, but the Count gave a violent start, and in his anxiety to retain hold of Miriam and the spoon, forgot his English and exclaimed—

"Nicht möglich!"

"So anyone would have thought, but it is the case; she has married Sir Leopold Gunstan Rudkin."

There was a twinkle in Lucy's eye as she bent nearer and said—

"Now then, Renie, will you laugh at me again? I told you he was the man who looked through the window, the man whom I found that night in your uncle's study, and he and your aunt had met before."

The Count could only ejaculate—"My dear girl!"

He had not heard his wife's opinions before; Renie had, and she recognized the truth of them.

"It is no use, Carl, I said it then, and I say it now, and mean it. There is a secret somewhere, and I have had many a talk to Renie about it. Now this marriage settles it; I half suspected something of the sort. If they had not been acquainted how could they have found each other when she left Zeigleheath after he went to China? Do you think he ever *did* go? for I don't. I noticed your aunt's manner that day he arrived, and we were all standing on the terrace. And I am not the only one sceptical. You question old Nurse, Renie, and see if she is not awake."

"There are a number of things I recollect, that seemed odd to me at the time. But it is no use talking, they are married, and I hope they may be happy. We had better all be

friendly, or people may get thinking something!"

The Count had put baby down, and was exclaiming—

"Dear me! bless us all!"

"What's the matter, Carl?" asked his wife.

"Why, my dear, such a thing as this never came to my knowledge before, because we need not believe what we hear if it is unpleasant. However Lady Rudkin could show her face in her old home, under such peculiar circumstances, I cannot understand. Shall you call, my dear?"

"What do you think, Renie?"

"Oh, I am inclined for peace any time before war. It certainly rests with you and Addy, you are the leading ladies here. Sir Leopold spoke to me before his marriage, and begged me to take his wife by the hand. I was much perplexed, but I see the reason of it now. He asked me to show mercy and

forget. If you can do that, Lucy, it would be only Christianlike; that is, if you like the woman herself. She seemed rather distressed to-day. It will make them unhappy, I fear, if they are slighted." There was a pause, during which Carl had a mysterious conversation with baby; he took far more notice of it than its mother did.

"Well, I am willing to do the best I can. I wonder what Mr. and Mrs. Howard will say? He never liked Lady Rudkin, you know?"

"Yes, I remember it, and also that it is quite dusk, and Miss Trufit will be waiting for her tea, so good-bye."

Moordart was up in arms; all the time passed in talking. It was quite a sensation, and if that old proverb about the ears of the person talked about burning is true, Lady Rudkin, for the space of three days, must have suffered martyrdom. In the interest she

created her husband almost escaped notice. The female portion of the population seemed disposed to pity him, from some cause or other, which was not very clear. But doubtless his handsome face had a good deal to do with it.

Addy made Norman take her over to Fern Cottage directly the news arrived through the agency of a villager who was paying his addresses to one of the maids. It was after eight, but she insisted she would go, and the good-natured fellow humoured the little madam.

When they reached the cottage Addy was rather flushed. They had had the wind at their backs all the way, which is not the most comfortable thing on a dark night, and the small wife, in keeping up with her husband's strides, had left both goloshes behind her in Pig Lane.

Renie was writing to Mr. Chalmers, and

Miss Trufit, who had only just been told, was dropping every other stitch of her knitting, and ejaculating "Mercy on us!"

The consultation was a curious one; now that it was known, Addy and Miss Priscilla declared that they had suspected it all along. Norman said little, and thought a good deal. It is scarcely worth while relating what they said; it was pretty much like the saying of everyone else.

Little by little the surprise wore off, and some people called at Zeigleheath, the first to call being Mrs. Howard, accompanied by Miss Trufit and the Countess Helring. Renie kept away, and had not seen Lady Rudkin, excepting the day she called at the cottage with her husband. Whatever she was willing to do it mattered not to him; he was evidently determined that they should manage to keep peace with Renie.

The next question that presented itself to

the minds of the free-speaking Moordartites was "Are they happy?" But that they could not decide. The servants knew nothing to tell; they did not disagree, and my lady never contradicted Sir Leopold. So matters stood when the days got short and fires were required.

Miss Priscilla made so many excursions to Beach Cliff, regardless of autumn chills and dews, that, as a consequence, she caught a severe cold, and had to keep her bed for several days.

Renie did not feel lonely; she had plenty to do, and to think about. Everyone was not at a stand, like Sir Leopold and his wife.

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CHAPTER IV

Rufus Sebastain had kept his promise ; he had returned the seventy pounds with a letter of sincere thanks. He was doing well, but he felt ill, and complained of a worrying cough that prevented him sleeping. He vaguely hinted at home, and made allusions to Zeigleheath as if his heart turned in that direction.

The letter was not at all fretful ; there was a clear ring of resignation and rest throughout it unusual to him. A calm seemed upon him.

Renie was reading this epistle in the afternoon by the drawing-room fire. Miss Trufit was coming down for tea, and Renie had gone in to see that the room was well warmed. Once there, she had been tempted into a few moments of laziness, and taken the artist's letter out of her pocket.

The second reading had impressed her more forcibly than the first, and tears welled up to her clear eyes. Suddenly she sank on her knees on the rug with bowed head, and prayed that her lover might come back to her, that she might see him once again. There was an agonised look in the eyes as she murmured, "If he died over there what should I do! winter and summer, winter and summer, and him never, never to come back. Oh, God! not that, not that; let me see him before you take him away into that grand obscurity where I sometimes fear I shall never find my way!"

In a little while the cloud passed and left the face still. It *was* a hard lesson, and one which I trust many young people may not be required to learn. So wrapt in thought was Renie, that she did not hear a knock at the door, and it was only Christie's voice that roused her.

"A letter for you, ma'am; a boy brought it more than an hour since, but I wanted to help Miss Trufit dress, and quite forgot it. I hope it won't turn anything wrong for you, Miss Renie."

"No, Christie, there is no post mark, so it is only some message from the village, probably a begging letter. How is Miss Trufit?"

"My opinion is that she is quite well, Miss Renie. She has taken quarts and quarts of that nasty stuff, barley water. She'll be down presently."

No sooner had the maid departed than

Renie proceeded to open her letter with a sigh. It was not much she could do to assist others, and she rarely, if ever, sent them away without some trifle. But it all mounts up and tells the tale at the end of the year, and Renie might well sigh.

The writing she remarked was not that of an uneducated person, the letters were well formed, but shaky. It was the old style of writing, fine and thin. The note was short, a few lines of the same faded writing which, even in its decline, could not help giving a hint of something better before it went out for ever.

"Miss Rudkin,—

"Help one of your own sex. I am dying fast, and I want particularly to see you. I have something to tell. When you see the mill lighted to-night, come; you will find me there. No harm shall befall you, don't fear, and come alone."

That was all, no name, no address. The mill was undoubtedly the old water mill which could be seen out of the little painting room, across the meadow.

Renie was considerably perplexed; she hesitated about going to such a lonely place after dark, and yet she was besought to do so by a dying woman. If she did not go she might be sorry for it after, and surely no one could have any spite against her? No, indeed, few were more truly respected and loved than Renie Rudkin. She was kind and unselfish, ready to do anyone a good turn, and the poor fishermen's wives could have related many a tale, had they been asked, of kindness and benefits received from the hands of the "young lady." Out of all the boats that brought fish to land a little of the best found its way to Fern Cottage. Renie did not know how to act; it was plainly to be a secret because she was asked to go alone, therefore she must not tell Miss Trufit.

The appearance of that lady stopped all further thought on the subject for the time being, and when tea was over Renie ran into the little room and looked out of the window. Yes, there was a light burning in the mill window sure enough.

For a second did Renie stand gazing at it doubtfully, and then a portion of the mysterious note flashed across her mind, "I am dying fast." Could she expect mercy or help from God if she refused it to one of her fellow creatures? No. "Be ye kind one to another."

"I shall go and risk it. I have never harmed anyone, and I cannot imagine that anyone will desire to harm me."

It was but the work of a moment to run upstairs and put on her hat and shawl.

"Miss Trufit, I am extremely sorry to leave you, but I am obliged to go out to-night for an hour, perhaps two. Don't be uneasy, and if you feel tired go to bed."

The little old lady looked very much as if she would like to ask, "Where are you going to?" But she dared take no liberties with Miss Rudkin; she never confided in anyone without she felt disposed, and Miss Trufit rightly conjectured that if she had wanted her to know she would have told her. So she contented herself with saying—

"Very well, my dear."

And Renie went out, after apprising Christie, who was sitting with old nurse in the snug little kitchen trimming a cap with cherry-coloured ribbons. She threw down the flimsy stuff, and rushed after her mistress, catching her just as she was going down the garden.

"Miss Renie, may I come with you, please?"

"No, Christie, there is no need; go back to your millinery," and Renie shut the gate.

Her road lay along by the river till she reached the bridle path leading to the mill.

She could have gone by the lane, but she considered it, if anything, safer the quieter way. The night was fine and the air clear, with a sprinkling of frost through it, early as it was. She recollected how she, Rufus, and Lucy had walked along the opposite side of the stream one night two years ago.

As Renie neared the mill the barking of dogs met her ear and arrested her steps. The light was still burning, and once the outline of a figure intervened. Clearly there were people in the old house; who were they? She resolved to go yet a little further before she turned coward; but she need not have moved, there was someone at hand to explain away the difficulty.

The step was so soft that Renie never heard it, and she started as the form stood directly in her path, as if it had risen out of the earth.

"Don't be alarmed," said a musical sad

voice; "I have come to take you past the dogs. Mother told me to watch for you."

She led, and Renie followed; she did not like to appear inquisitive, and the girl volunteered no information. Besides, there was not much to ask, at least about whom she was going to see, the vans and huge dogs told that. The gipsies had encamped once more by the old water mill, and the girl who piloted Renie was our old friend Althea.

There was no one about the mill, but the smell of burning wood showed where the wild band were. Up the moss-grown steps sprang the gipsy girl, and gently tapped at the door.

There was profound silence for a second, with only the splash of the wheel to break it. Then along the boards came a decided manly tread, and the door, stiff with age and rust, was drawn open. The light from the inner room reached the doorway, and Renie, glancing up,

recognised the white haggard man as the king of the strange tribe; he who had treated them with such ceremony that night in the wood. He motioned her to enter with a stately bend of his fine head, and she did so. He then exchanged a few words with his daughter in Spanish, to which she replied—

"Yes, father. Please to follow me," added she, turning to Renie, who stood regarding the couple in wonderment.

The mill house was very old, and composed as much of stone as wood. It was built out over the water, which at this point considerably widened, and the rickety stage before alluded to was entered from a door, or, possibly, a window. The rooms were not many, but of good size. The one that Renie entered was built out over the stream. It was partly furnished, that is to say there was a bed, a table, two chairs, and a piece of rich carpet on the floor, while on the stone hearth glowed

a good wood fire. The graceful guide went at once to the bed side.

"Mother, she has come! Mother?"

"Yes, my child, yes, I know, you may go, and shut the door."

It was a sweet, weak voice that spoke, like the daughter's, and the hand that lay outside the quilt was a lady's. Althea did as requested, and left Renie standing midway between the bed and the door. The light from the fire did not catch the face in the bed from where Renie stood, and she moved slightly.

"Will you come and sit by me, Miss Rudkin? I am very weak, and cannot speak loud."

Renie did so, and looked intently at the face on the pillow.

It was a lovely one, and seemed to remind her of someone she had seen. The features were beautifully refined, and the eye wonder-

fully full for one so old and ill. The soft hair was snow-white and fell in straggling bands round the sweet face. Renie was touched by the look of gentle sadness that pervaded the countenance.

"You are in pain, I fear?"

"No, not at all, you think so because I am crying. It is not that; I cannot help shedding tears when I see you."

Renie was amazed.

"You sent for me this afternoon, did you not? Can I do anything for you?"

"Yes, raise me a little please, then I can talk better."

Renie did as requested very gently, and made the poor creature quite comfortable; it was the first sick person she had ever been called upon to touch.

"There, is that better?"

"Yes, dear; now sit down."

For a moment there was silence, then the dying woman spoke—

"Miss Rudkin, have you any idea who I am?"

"No, not exactly. You are the mother of that pretty girl, and I suppose one of the gipsies?"

A smile crossed the lovely wan face.

"You are partly correct. But I must tell you, for it is impossible for you to guess. I was not born a gipsy; I was born in that house you see through that window. I am your aunt."

For a time there sounded nothing in Renie's ears but the rush of the river as it flowed under the window, then she gasped—

"My aunt!"

"Yes, I am, it is sacred truth, and it is to tell it that I sent for you. I am Corinda Rudkin, your father's sister."

"Stay," interrupted Renie, "Mrs. Troost told me of my long lost aunt soon after I came to Zeigleheath. She believed her drowned, I think?"

"Did she? Ah! well, she is alive this moment and before you. But dead to them and the world years ago. Nearly twenty-nine years since I disappeared suddenly, and I went off with this tribe of Spanish gipsies. Ah! you start, and no wonder; it seems incredible, but I did it. I was the only daughter of the house of Rudkin, considered very beautiful, and idolised by my two brothers. I was very happy, and spent my time roving about the cliffs and woods. It was nothing new to me to meet gipsies, for they had been encamped here ever since I could remember.

"One day I met the young King Aaron, who opened the door for you just now. I suppose it was to be: I had never loved before, and I straightway fell in love with the handsome young gipsy. We met often, and spoke of our love for each other. I was heart-broken, for I knew too well that neither

Bevis nor your father would ever forgive me or notice me again if I married a gipsy, and yet I could not part from him. Oh, how my heart was troubled; how I cried and wailed, till I felt I should die. And Aaron persuaded me to go with him, begged of me day after day. At last I consented; his father was just dead, and his mother very old. I was mad, of course, but I did it. I left my home that afternoon for a walk, and made my way to the beach, where Aaron waited in a boat. I was in a fearful state of fright, and hardly knew what I was doing. He rowed to a place called Bellstow, far up the coast, and there the vans joined us.

"We journeyed on till we came to a pretty seaside place—Garthside. There a gentleman had built a church in gratitude for his daughters being restored to health by the air of the sweet little spot. In that pretty white church we were married by the young clergy-

man, and directly after moved on again. Aaron can speak English, and I had not married beneath my station, as it turned out, could his claims have been stated. My husband is a Spanish noble, but his father was outlawed for some misdemeanour, and never showed his face amongst his people again. He took to roaming, and his son inherited the propensity. I begged him to settle in Spain, for we could not return to England. He did so at Cordova, and there his mother died, and my first child was born."

Great tears rolled down the pale face, and for a second the dying woman was quite overcome ; but a few moments sufficed to conquer the emotion, and she continued her story—

"I have never repented my marriage, for my husband has ever been kind to me, and we are all in all to each other. But we must part shortly, I feel. I often wished and longed to see or hear of my family, but at the

same time I had rather they believed and mourned me as dead than know me to be the wife of a gipsy, and I knew they would prefer it, too. The Rudkins are a proud, stern race. Years passed on, and my second child, Althea, was born. I was happy and contented ; we had every comfort in our pretty Spanish home. My husband is not a poor man. But I had a sorrow which never let me rest day or night, and turned my hair white as you see it. My first child was a boy, and it was my desire to give him a good education, and, if possible, put him back into the rank I had left.

" He was never to know anything of his parents, because we thought it might hinder his progress, so when quite a child he was placed in a monastery under the care of some learned monks, who solemnly swore never to mention his parents to him. I kept away, dearly as I loved him. I heard how he was from time to time, and persuaded myself that

it was the best thing for him. It was the Rudkin pride, you see.

"After he had been absent fourteen years we said he should go to England and be put to some profession, for we had saved all the time on purpose to give our son every advantage. But when his father went to the monastery he was gone. The wretches had turned him out, my poor, poor boy!"

Sobs checked the poor creature, but Renie's eyes were blazing.

"We searched high and low, but he could not be found, and we heard of one boy answering to his age and looks having been found dead, starved to death by the road side. I was mad then, insane for years, and when at last God let my reason return I had but one desire, one wish, and that was to revisit my native land, see my childhood's home. My husband readily consented, and calling together his band again, we set out. Few knew who I was, for the old people that were

with them when I married Aaron had died, and thus it was we appeared after an absence of twenty-seven years. I was not afraid of being known; nevertheless I kept out of sight. I heard of Bevis's late marriage and the birth of an heir, but I did not see him. I learnt of you and your sister being left early orphans, and my heart yearned to you as it did to my boy. I have told you how I longed to come home, how I felt that I *must* come, that I was called.

"Well, something happened one night soon after we came that I have never been able to make Aaron believe, that I sometimes can't credit myself, and yet I don't think I was mad then. Oh! I remember it so well. Supper was getting ready, and I was sitting in the doorway of our tent, thinking of my boy; I saw him, as a child, lying on his back on the grass, laughing, as he used to do before we sent him to that cursed monastery where they murdered him. For it was mur-

der; he was starved to death by the roadside, you know. I see him every night, when darkness comes, sitting crying with hunger and cold under a hedge. Oh! God! Oh! God!"

She struggled up in bed, and her cry was so loud that it reached the ears of her husband. Renie tried to soothe her, but it was useless, the poor creature was quite beside herself, and moaned and cried till Renie got almost frightened. But the gipsy having entered, he saw how things were.

"Hagar! Hagar! my dear wife! lie down; be quiet, all's well."

The sight of his loved face recalled the parting gleams of reason, and pressing one white hand to her brow, she murmured—

"I see our boy, Aaron; I see him sitting under that hedge. Oh! it is gone now. I must have been dreaming."

He kissed her, and left the room, and she went on with her story, after being told where she left off by Renie.

"Yes, yes, I recollect now; I was sitting thinking, and when I raised my eyes I saw, standing close by Aaron at the fire, my boy; I did. His face was turned towards me, and it had the same look as when a child. I could not speak, I could not move, and something came with a dreadful ache in my head, and prevented me seeing. When I looked again my child had gone. But I did not see him, not a child, but a man, and it gave me peace, for his face did not look as if he were starving. It was good of the angels to feed him, wasn't it?"

She was dropping off again, and Renie strived to recall her.

"Yes, very good. But go on; tell me what happened after he went."

"Oh! yes; why Aaron said I had been dreaming; that it was a young man who came with some ladies, having their fortunes told. And then we went away. But I could not rest, I felt I was dying, and when I heard

of Bevis's death I resolved to see and tell you all. You bear a good name in the village, and I wanted you to do something for me."

"Yes, I will, if I can. What is it?"

"I shall be dead in a day or two, and I want to be buried with my father and mother, that is near to them, for I could not rest with them because I am a stranger. That's why Aaron calls me Hagar. I could not die away from my home, and I should be happy if I could only hear something of Rufus—I—"

"Rufus; is your son named Rufus?'

"Yes, yes, that's his name. Rufus Sebastain. Tell me, have you seen him? Quick, quick."

White to the very lips was Renie Rudkin, as she leaned over the parting mother.

"Hush! hush! and I will tell you."

Renie held a cup to the dying lips, and after the invalid had drank, said—

"You were, indeed, called home. The people who came to your camp were myself,

a friend, and a clever young artist, named Rufus Sebastain, whom uncle had got to paint Lady Rudkin and Rodney. He stayed with us some time, and he told me his history, how he was reared in a monastery and worked his way to England. He spoke of a face which haunted him in his dreams, that face is yours, because Mrs. Troost showed me the portrait of my Aunt Clorinda shut up in her rooms, and I copied it from memory. That copy Rufus Sebastain found, and said it was his dearly loved face. He asked me to give it to him, and I did."

Renie here broke down, and the dying woman asked her with feverish haste to go on. Unselfish as ever, Renie complied, and related what she knew, kindly suppressing all the early misery of the poor boy, and showing the thankful mother only the bright side.

"And where is he now?"

"In Strasburg; I heard from him the other day; we are friends."

"Thank God! you are friends and cousins. It is strange how it has come about; to think that he should find his way to my home, live under his uncle's roof, and that I should find him here. I knew I saw him; a mother never forgets her child. Renie, listen to me. Don't tell him, if you see him again, who his parents were. Do not tell him that he is heir to Zeigleheath; let it pass. There would be trouble to prove his claim as my son, for I can produce no papers, and his father believes him dead, as my people believed me. Let Sir Leopold reign, and let my sin and folly die out. It is better so; Althea does not know, and her father will never tell her. When I am dead they will leave here, never to return. It is better so; better that it should be forgotten. I am at peace since I know my boy lives, and I can wait till we meet in the next world, where all sins are washed away. God has punished me for my folly, but I am content if the punishment

stops with me. Renie, be kind to my poor, homeless, wandering boy, if he comes back, for my sake, and I will bless you."

The mother pleaded effectually; pleaded as only a mother can, and with a deep sob Renie threw herself on the bed.

"Aunt, aunt, don't ask me again; I will do it not only for your sake, but for his own. I love him."

"And does he love you?"

"No."

"Oh, Renie, Renie, my poor child, is this your lot? Is the curse coming round this way? I would give all I have to save you."

"Never mind," answered the girl, "I should not have loved him. And to think we are cousins after all."

They did not speak, they had enough to think about, those two so strangely united. It might have passed for a dream to Renie, but for the surroundings and the chilly hand that grasped hers. The fire had burnt itself

away to a mass of deep red, and footsteps could be heard pacing along the stage outside.

"I must go now," said Renie, rising, "but I will come again to-morrow."

"Oh," replied the sweet voice, "I shall not be here to-morrow, Renie. Kiss me, my dear, and I charge you to preserve my secret."

They kissed, and then Renie, by her aunt's instructions, tapped at the window, and directly Althea appeared, to whom her mother beckoned. The girl understood the duty required of her, and conducted Renie past the dogs, and a little way on.

"Will you watch for me by six in the morning, Althea? I want to see your mother again."

"Yes, lady," replied the beautiful girl, sadly, "I'll watch for you."

CHAPTER V.

Renie hurried home, and found Miss Trufit had gone to bed, for which she was not a little thankful. She was in no humour to chatter, nor yet to sleep, and when she crept into bed at midnight it was only to lie awake, tossing and thinking of the strange story she had heard.

It seemed almost incredible, and yet it was true—Renie did not, could not doubt it. She recognised a resemblance in the poor faded woman to the picture of the blooming Clorinda, locked up at Zeigleheath, and also

to the artist. Then his name was the same, the monks had given him his proper one, though he doubted it. And she had fallen in love with her own cousin. What would anyone say if they knew? What would they do if they knew he was the rightful heir to the estate; but they must never know, she had given her word never to tell the secret. At five she rose, and dressing quickly, passed out, just as Christie unbarred the door.

"I shall be back before breakfast is ready, Christie, and you need not tell Miss Trufit I am out."

"Very well, ma'am," replied Christie, looking extremely astonished.

Her mistress was not given to early rising, breakfast was never before eight all the year round. Renie made the best speed possible to the old mill, and was met as promised by Althea. But the girl's eyes were red and swollen, her face pitiably pale.

"How is your mother this morning?"

"Better, much," answered the girl shortly, hanging her head, while great tears dropped.

They maintained silence till the room was reached, and then the poor girl burst into a loud cry.

The cause was soon apparent, her mother was dead. The gipsy queen had gone to her last home to wait for her boy. Renie cried too, as she looked at the sweet pale face. She had died with one hand locked fast in her husband's, and he was kneeling by the bed-side, sobbing convulsively. She had died, looking at her house; so near, and yet so far. The man never moved, and his daughter would have roused him had not Renie prevented it.

"Not now, let him be. I will come again to-night at dusk, tell your father."

But her tone, low as it was, reached the stricken husband's ears, and he struggled up, laying the thin hand tenderly down with a

great tearless sob. His face was distorted with emotion, the eyes quite bloodshot; and he bit his lips while speaking, to keep down the rising sobs.

"She has left me, my Hagar;" here he uttered some Spanish passionately, evidently terms of endearment. "She told you all, I know, and where she would like to be buried. I would not ask a favour (and the face flushed proudly), but it is for her."

"Yes, I know, and will see about it at once. Can I do anything more for you?"

"No, no; only mind what she told you. We shall leave here shortly—for ever."

Renie fulfilled her promise. She saw the clergyman, Mr. Toplin, and told him of the poor creature's wish, of course making no mention of who she was. He readily consented, and had a grave dug close by the wall of the old church, under which was the Rudkin vault. The funeral was strangely impressive, the mourners wore no black, the

daughter stood near Renie in her scarlet petticoat, and the members of the band behind. The gipsy king never spoke a word, and as they all turned from the grave those who watched them shed tears. The next morning, before nine o'clock, Mr. Toplin made his appearance at Fern Cottage, and asked to see Miss Rudkin. He refused to come in, and told Christie to say he would not detain her mistress a second.

"Good morning, Mr. Toplin," said Renie, coming out of the sitting-room where she was at breakfast with Miss Trufit. "This is an early visit."

"Yes, it is. But, my dear Miss Renie, I want your help in a little matter. That strange funeral we had yesterday roused my interest in the tribe, and putting aside their well known reluctance to admit men of my calling into their camp, I ventured down last night to see if I could afford the poor fellow and his child any comfort in their affliction.

I found them on the eve of starting, but in great trouble about the sudden illness of their chief. He had fallen down in a fit about an hour before I got there. I wished a doctor to be summoned, but that they objected to. I remained with the poor girl till he regained consciousness, and he addressed her in Spanish and asked for you. It was too late for you to go last night, but I promised to send you this morning. It is curious what a fancy they have taken to you, Miss Rudkin. He gave me to understand I was not wanted. You will go?"

"Yes, at once. They are nice enough people, Mr. Toplin, only strange. I shall send for Dr. Owen to see the poor fellow."

"You need not, my dear; I saw his gig standing at the toll-bar gate as I crossed. I will tell the groom to bring his master here on my way back. Good morning, good morning."

Renie had told Miss Priscilla of the death

of the gipsy queen, and it had greatly excited that lady's curiosity. Now that she heard of the chief's illness she expressed her readiness to accompany Renie on her errand of mercy. But this could not be allowed; Miss Priscilla was not to be depended upon, even had Renie felt disposed to entrust the story of her long lost aunt to her keeping. But she was not, that must be buried in her own breast.

There are strange things hidden in many a family that people would not credit if they heard. If it were possible for us to view our life—what we are to do, and see, and hear—I think a good many of us would recoil from it. My idea of the world at present is that it is nothing but vexation and worry, and the best part of the people in it drones. I have heard of the happiness of this, and the beauty of that, but I am bound to confess that I have failed to find either one or the other.

"Miss Trufit, I prefer your room to your company on this occasion; these wild people

have feelings as well as ourselves, and I deem this hardly a suitable time to go and stare at them. If I send for wine or anything, kindly return it by the messenger."

A few moments more, and Renie was on her way to the mill, having instructed Christie to ask Dr. Owen to follow her when he came. But he did not overtake her, and she passed the dogs and knocked at the door gently. Althea opened it with a white, scared face.

"Oh! lady; thank heaven you are here! My father lies yonder very sick."

"Well, we must do our best to set him on his legs again, Althea. What is the matter with him?"

"He had a long faint last evening just as we were starting, and the good man came and stayed with me. He spoke very kindly."

Great tears were rolling down her cheeks.

"Come, Althea," said Renie, "don't fret yourself ill, or there will be no one to nurse your father."

Something in the girl's face caused Renie to regard her earnestly. It was such a stricken, hopeless face, half smothered with the long raven hair, and the eyes seemed to part with the great drops helplessly. They remained wide open and the tears quietly brimming over. They were cousins, those two girls, so strangely found, so strangely divided, and she was Rufus's sister. Renie turned back, on her way to the inner room, to where the girl stood so sadly. Her question was a direct simple one.

"Are you unhappy, Althea?"

The girl started, and the blood rushed madly to her white brow. But in Renie's quiet face she saw more than idle curiosity, she saw the question was kindly meant, kindly asked. Her guard was knocked aside by this tone of gentleness, and she let her pretty head droop as she said lowly—

"Yes, I am wretched!"

It was not the reply Renie had expected

when she asked the question. Had the girl been other than what she was, in all probability Renie would have tried to appease her and passed on. But she felt that the help she offered her must be sincere, and deep enough to reach her trouble.

"Will you tell me what makes you so wretched? is it other than your mother's death and father's illness?"

"Yes," said the girl, excitedly; "yes, it is a bitter wrong, so cruel, so hard, that I pray to die every night!"

"Child, do you know what you are saying?"

"Yes, lady; Althea knows, and feels, though she is but a gipsy girl."

"I don't doubt that, but tell me who did you this wrong, and if I can make it easier for you I will?"

A flush spread over the girl's face, and, letting her eyes fall, she said—

"Not now, not now, lady; I will again. My father wants you."

It was of little use pressing the subject further then, and Renie continued her way to the room. The chief lay insensible, watched by an old crone; he kept murmuring to himself, and as Renie stood she caught the names Hagar and Rudkin. He was evidently very ill, poor man; and she hoped Dr. Owen would not be long. Althea entered the room softly.

"I have told the doctor to come, he can't be long now; he will be able to do something for your father."

The girl whispered her thanks, and stepped out again.

The dogs had commenced to bark, a sure signal that a stranger was at hand. It was Dr. Owen, Renie recognised his cheery voice.

"Well, my girl, and where's my patient? Eh, Miss Renie, you are always getting the start of me, what's the matter here?"

Renie explained the case, and what she knew of them, to which Dr. Owen nodded and walked into the room. Presently he returned, and leaning his back against the rough joints of wood, said—

"This is a bad case, Miss Rudkin; the poor fellow is very ill, and if it does not turn to a severe case of brain fever I shall be agreeably surprised, that's all. There must be great care taken; I only wish we could get a nurse here, but that is quite out of the question."

"Yes. But that woman will no doubt follow your instructions?"

He laughed.

"I really cannot be sure of that, these people are so fond of their herbs and messes. At any rate we must trust them and do our best. I shall come again before dusk. You seem at home here, Miss Rudkin?"

"Yes, the woman who died the other day sent for me, and I had a long talk with her,

poor creature! Her husband is ill, in my opinion, through grief."

"Very likely, very likely. That girl's a rare beauty, what splendid eyes she has; the daughter I suppose? they are as wild a set as ever I saw."

"Yes, she is the child, an only one; at any rate all with them, they were just starting when he was taken ill."

"Indeed; ah, it will be many days before he can be moved," with a nod to the sick room, "with safety."

"Doctor Owen, I will supply all that is needed, but I suppose it is not much at present?"

"No, Miss Rudkin, not till the fever abates, then I shall trouble you. And now good day to you, young lady."

CHAPTER VI.

For many days, as Dr. Owen predicted, the poor man lay near to death's door, with burning hand and head, parched lips and glittering eyes. Renie went every day, sometimes twice, but she could do no more than try to comfort the weeping Althea, who grew to love her dearly in her trouble. All that was required for the sick man's use Renie supplied, and when the crisis was passed and the great giant lay as passive as a baby, she carried down fruits and jellies, little dainty bits nicely cooked, and wine. The gipsies got to watch

for her, and the children and dogs no longer flew at her approach. Her invalid was an object of great interest, and many were the inquiries as to whom she would be looking after next. "Anyone who wants it," answered she, and they knew that to be the truth. Renie Rudkin was no respecter of persons. When help was needed there it was given.

But during these long weary days, for it was close upon a fortnight since the funeral in the pretty churchyard that astonished the people so much, Renie had spoken no word to Althea of her sorrow; the girl had been too much occupied attending to her father, and perhaps it was a good thing. One may get selfish with one's sorrow if nothing else calls for attention. And it was a pretty sight to see that stern, hard man and his daughter being knitted closer together in the presence of extreme weakness and the absence of the mother. He was quite a different man now

towards Renie; he no longer treated her with coldness, and at times his true character would flash out in tender, strong bursts of affection for his child and dead wife, that made Renie no longer wonder at the aunt's loving him.

He was a handsome man when age was creeping over him; what must he have been when young, when he wooed and won the only daughter of the proud Rudkins? The chief made no objection to see Dr. Owen, but he did to seeing the Rev. Thomas Toplin, who, true to his Maker and his conscience, arrived at the mill in a state of extreme perspiration, and his face like the setting sun, every other day.

He was very plump, the rev. gentleman, and very good-hearted. He was a pleasant parson, and did great credit to the air and pasture of Moordart. When he preached a severe sermon and hinted at the punishment that eventually overtook any backslider it was a very hard

thing to believe him when you glanced up and caught sight of his portly form and glowing cheeks, and would-be horrified countenance, which was completely extinguished by the habitual twinkle in the light gray eye. He did not seem very much awed or troubled by dismal forebodings; the only thing that appeared likely to overtake him was a fit of apoplexy.

He certainly was a most comfortable, happy-looking spiritual adviser, and I have not the least doubt his religion was equally sincere with that of his many long-faced brethren. I don't believe in Christianity that is encased in the "dumps" and the "blues."

It is astonishing the notions some people embrace in the face of reason and common sense. Take, for instance, our state in the next world, which is so faintly spoken of and so gingerly handled by most. It is a subject I never yet heard any minister discuss, and I have patiently listened for it Sunday after

Sunday for years. I have heard a few who got very close to it, and then adroitly veered round, or, finding that the conventional twenty minutes was up, smothered the matter in "And now to God the Father," &c. I have arrived at the conclusion that they are afraid of it, that they dare not speculate, and yet it does not seem to me a matter of speculation. It to me is the plainest portion of God's word. And yet, venture to say to anyone that you expect to have your full complement of arms and legs in heaven, and to blow your nose, and see how they will look at you in horror and amazement! All you can get out of them is—

"That we are not intended to look into those things." Which, in my humble opinion, is just about the same as "So on," which fits in nicely when people are trying to teach or explain that about which they know nothing themselves.

What their ideas are I have not the least conception, and I don't intend to ask. I am quite content with my own reflections, which, thank God! make me contemplate my existence in the next world with great joy and peace; and He does not let any doubts or fears arise! I stand with my hands outstretched and He fills them. If it is ignorance that secures me this confidence, this peace, He knows it, and I have every faith in Him to feel assured that had it been wrong or displeasing to Him, He would in His mercy have awakened me out of my happy dream before now!

By degrees Mr. Toplin ceased calling, and one day Dr. Owen said plainly, "I don't see any necessity for me to attend longer, Miss Rudkin, and you can just take your time about paying me. I don't suppose the king will think of it when you are by. If any change occurs, direct them to apprise me of it, but I

don't anticipate any, and as soon as he feels strong enough they may pack up and go."

Renie agreed, and duly continued her visits to the sick man, who now began to talk of returning to his own country. He was most guarded in all he said, lest Althea should get an inkling of her mother's relation to Renie; it was apparently his desire as well as his wife's that the truth should remain a secret.

One day as Renie was leaving the room he called her back, and lifting his sunken eyes to hers he said, handing her a small package—

"Take this, Miss Rudkin, and two days after we have left this place open it, not before."

Renie carried it home, and locked it up in her cabinet in the little side room.

November was pretty well advanced, and the Moordart people commenced their winter parties. Mrs. Howard was having one that Wednesday night, to which Renie had been invited, along with Miss Trufit. But she did

not feel inclined to go, and accordingly told Addy so.

She seemed more in need of rest, and an evening without the endless prattle of good, well-meaning Miss Priscilla, was not to be despised.

The way she was passing it was not calculated to benefit her much. Tea over she repaired to the side-room, and shutting herself up alone with the fire, set about settling her accounts. Renie did that regularly—she had a horror of getting into difficulties. That finished, she allowed her thoughts to slip over the sea in the wake of her love. He had not written for some time, and she was very uneasy about him and his worrying cough.

Ah me! the bright side of her life had indeed to come. Now I don't pretend to say that this brooding and wearing of heart and head at all improved matters, and I dare say I ought, as she is one of the, if not *the*, principal characters in this story, to make her

above all such ordinary weakness. But I don't care to colour my heroes and heroines past all possible recognition. What is more natural than to suppose Renie would sit and think about her absent darling, since she had one? Nothing, that I can imagine. And I may as well tell the truth without regard to her feelings—she—cried.

In the midst of these drops which rolled down into her lap, quickly and silently, as if they were ashamed of having to do it, a rat-a-tat-tat sounded at the front door. This was the signal for all trace of tears to be disposed of, and when Christie opened, entered and said, "Frost wishes to see you, ma'am," she had not the least idea what "ma'am" had been engaged in.

"Frost? Show him in here, Christie?"

The room was lighted by a lamp and the fire, but it mostly depended upon that last named element for its illumination, for the lamp wanted oil, and kept bobbing up and

down in a very uncertain manner. Christie had forgotten to trim it, and there was not too much of anything at Fern Cottage; so without bringing the one out of the drawing-room, it could not be replaced. Renie, sitting there by herself, had never noticed it, and it was not till Frost entered that it occurred to her.

"Sit down, Frost; I hope you are feeling better. Why, surely, I see another figure in the doorway?"

"Yes, Miss Renie, you do; it's me, ma'am," said Mrs. Troost, advancing. "I brought Frost down."

"Well, come in, Mrs. Troost, and pull the door to, please. Now, is there anything important that you come together, or are you too poorly to come alone, Frost?"

Renie poked the fire to get a better light.

"I think I must get another lamp."

"No, no; please, Miss Renie, we are well enough off for light. I did not think of

coming to-night, but I met McCabe coming back from Mrs. Howard's, and he gave me a lift as far as his next fare, Miss Averill's, and he told me he had only taken one lady from Fern Cottage—Miss Trufit. So I made bold to come, knowing you were alone."

"And I came along with him, Miss Renie, because he is so shook; indeed we both are."

"I am very glad to see you, I am sure. I fully intended going to Zeigleheath, but of late my daily walk has been to the water mill. No doubt you heard of the sad trouble the gipsies have been in, Mrs. Troost?"

"Oh dear, yes, ma'am; I heard all about it the other day when I went to see the Countess's baby. It is a pretty little darling, and the Count he is crazed over it; I never saw the like."

Renie assented to this, and then followed an awkward pause. They were not at ease; the two old people had come to talk of something vastly different from the Countess's

baby, and they each waited for the other to begin. Men get the credit of being braver than women, but in this case the order was reversed. Frost might have sat there shaking his white head at the fire for two hours, had it not been for Mrs. Troost. Renie was fairly puzzled; she could not find out what had induced this couple to come trotting out that cold November night. Mrs. Troost bent forward and poked old Frost.

"Now come, Frost, say your say and let us be gone."

The man twisted round and looked savage enough for a second, then said—

"Well, Betsy, you have broken the ice; I was just thinking how I could best tell our young lady I—I—"

"Go on, Frost; what is it?" said Renie, encouragingly.

"Miss Renie, I know no more how to commence than the man in the moon. I am certain

I shall scare you pretty nearly out of your wits. Don't you think so, Betsy ?"

But Betsy Troost had smothered her face in her handkerchief, and made no other reply than a rather apoplectic sob; so Frost, perceiving nothing was to be got from her in the shape of assistance, bravely resolved to enter the field of battle alone.

"Miss Renie, have you a good memory ?"

"I hope so, Frost," replied Renie, excessively puzzled. "It is pretty well exercised, what with one thing and another. I daresay I can recollect anything you want, providing it does not include dates. I could not tell you the day of the month the most important thing happened on, if I were to be killed for it."

"It's not dates I want, but facts, Miss Renie; do you clearly remember what happened at the time of my master's death ?"

"Yes, I believe I do. That is, what happened in my presence. But that time was a

very awful one, Frost; what are you going back to it for? I had rather you did not."

"Yes, I know you would, but I must, I *must*. Miss Renie, I have had something on my mind for months, and I never liked to mention it; indeed, I could make but very little of it till lately, and then I thought I should have gone mad, Miss Renie. Mrs. Troost knows how it haunts me; I cannot eat and I cannot sleep. I did intend seeing Mr. Chalmers or Mr. Howard, but then Mrs. Troost and me came to the conclusion that you ought to be told first, being the last of the old race.

"I will just tell my story my own way, if you please, Miss Renie, and then I shall be sure of putting everything where it belongs. You will please to remember, ma'am, that I acted as valet to Sir Bevis for many years; he was a very active gentleman, even up to the last, so my duty was light. Sometimes he took me with him, sometimes not. He did

not treat me altogether as a servant, he was too noble a gentleman to do that. I often wondered how it was he had never married, but he told me nothing. At last I felt certain he never would, and when your father died and left you and Miss Addy to his care I never gave it a second thought. You know how things were till you went to school and Miss Addy got married? Then came that visit to Brighton, and my master's marriage. A few months after I began to see something was wrong, and sometimes my master let drop words which made me fancy he repented the step he had taken so hastily. At the birth of the child he expressed no joy, and I saw that he was sorry. He then spoke to me one day about it, and the regret he felt at the thought of leaving his child, which he seemed to think he was sure to do, while it was young. He often mentioned you, Miss Renie, and said he must have you home, and I was very glad when you came. I need not

relate what happened during that time, you knew all that everyone else knew. I'll just step on to the time he—died. He was rather low spirited for a day or two before, but not at all ill, Miss Renie; no more ill than you are, Miss Renie, and suddenly he—died."

Frost's breath came short and fast, and Mrs. Troost's sobs deepened.

"Miss Renie, Doctor Bacup told a lie; my master did not die of what he said; he—he—met his death by foul play."

The old man fell on his knees on the rug, and commenced shivering and moaning, as he did that day in Mrs. Troost's parlour. No word had Renie uttered, but she slowly rose from her chair, white and cold, stiffened with horror. For a few moments the bloodless lips would form no words. Frost had not been far away when he said he feared he should scare her nearly out of her wits. He had almost done it.

"Oh! my precious lamb!" cried Mrs.

Troost, "don't just believe all he says, now don't; he is *so* shook. I tell him it's all that, Miss Renie."

Up got Frost.

"Betsy Troost, don't deceive yourself. I am not so shook that I don't know what I am saying. Just let me finish my story. I knew you would be horrified, dear missie."

"Go on, go on," said the girl; "tell it quickly."

"That night, Miss Renie, seems queerer every time I think of it. We was, as Mrs. Troost can tell you, in the servants' hall having supper, when the door opens softly and Mr. Gunstan stands there. I jumped up, but he told me never to mind, and beckoned to Bob, one of the lads. To him he whispered something and drew him out with him. We felt quite astonished, and many said what they thought of Mr. Gunstan. Supper was finished, and then the truth came out, Miss Renie; I don't know how it got to

my ears, I was all confused. I only recollected that my dear master was dead, and we had never been told. You remember us going in, Miss Renie, and Mr. Sebastain with us? How Doctor Bacup arrived, and how Mr. Gunstan took everything into his own hands? I was half daft, I own it, and nothing occurred to me till sometime after. Miss Renie, listen; when the body was to be carried upstairs, they would not let me touch it, no, nor come near them. Mr. Gunstan and the doctor carried it, and they were so careful, and kept eyeing each other every second step. Then again they would not allow any of us old servants to attend on our dear master. Mrs. Shepperton laid the body out, and kept the key of the room. I was much hurt; but my lady and Mr. Gunstan said they saw I was nervous, and they would not try me further. When you and Mr. Sebastain left the room that night, Miss Renie, me and Mrs. Troost stopped

behind, if you remember. The light was not any better than this, and the fast falling snow made me see badly. But I fancied I noticed something as I stood there, faintly at one side. My master wore broad white cravats, and—and I thought it looked stained—"

A stifled cry burst from Renie.

"Hush! my dear, hush," said the old man, wiping his eyes. "I may be mistaken about that, and I did not make much account of it at the time. But then I did not know how matters stood, it is only now, seeing how things have come round that all this returned to me. I have been nigh crazed for the last month, and I cannot rest till I have proved whether I am right or wrong.

"I did not know at that time that Mr. Gunstan had any claim to Zeigleheath. I had no notion that only a child stood between him and it. We was all so upset that many things passed, and then when the little heir

was drowned and I found you was hunting for the next heir, Mr. Gunstan, I began to think. But the finish came that night I opened the door for Sir Leopold and his bride; when I saw *her* face, I almost shouted in my horror. I could no longer hide from myself that things had come round oddly if they had not been pushed, and then one thought followed on another's heels till I told Mrs. Troost, and fretted myself ill. Miss Renie, I am not going to say how much is wrong, but all is not right."

It was some little time before Renie could speak, and Mrs. Troost continued to sob softly. It was a very good thing there was no more light in the room, for it would only have served to display the terror on each countenance more plainly. A moment sufficed to send Renie's quick mind back to the fatal time two years ago, and, misty as everything was in the grief and shock, she remembered little things which, put now by

the side of old Frost's tale, helped not to lessen but increase the fearful dread. Then there was Lucy's dismal forebodings, and her encounter by Sir Bevis's study that night, all of which Renie had made light of at the time. She sat looking at Frost with throbbing temples.

"Miss Renie, don't you think if you got Mr. Chalmers and Mr. Howard to put their heads together, they might decide upon some safe, sure way of getting to know the truth? I *will* know, and if they won't help me I shall go to the police."

This threat roused Renie.

"What! get us all up in arms. A charge of—of—murder? Nonsense, Frost, this may be only the result of fancy after all; and there must be no dashing into it madly. It is far too serious a matter. But I shall consult both Mr. Chalmers and my brother-in-law without delay."

"Did you never think anything before, Miss Renie?"

"No, Frost, never. I thought it was strange, and was much shocked when I found out who the bride was, but I had no idea that my dear uncle had—had—I cannot say it, Frost, it is too awful! And we may be wronging *him* after all. But, taking it all at the worst, he cannot have had to do with every calamity. Take little Sir Rodney's sudden death; it is no use attempting to say he had anything to do with *that*, because he was not present."

The "he" was distinguishably Sir Leopold, and Renie could not use his name in connection with such a dreadful charge.

"No, Miss Renie; no, I suppose not, because he says he was in China."

"He says!" Frost and the Countess Helring might shake hands; had not she openly expressed her doubt about that voyage to China."

"Mrs. Troost," asked Renie presently, observing that lady lay her pocket handkerchief aside, "do you know what has become of Mrs. Shepperton? She did not return with Lady Rudkin."

"No, Miss Renie; she did not, and I do not know anything about her. I have never asked my lady, and she has never told me. One at a time's plenty, in my opinion, and when Lady Gunstan Rudkin brought herself back that was quite enough for me. I never could abide that Shepperton."

"I know you could not. I have heard hardly anything of the present life at Zeigleheath, but I think I must ask now to be informed. Does Lady Rudkin ever revert to the past? her previous life there? her child, or any of us?"

"Well, Miss Rudkin, I cannot rightly say. I see very little of my lady. But she did one day mention Sir Rodney, and it surprised me, for she was under the impression that he died

of some sickness. It was one morning when I went to speak to Sir Leopold about a pigeon match that was just coming off. I found my lady in the room, and she commenced talking to me about different things, and then about the child. I was quite taken when she said, 'Poor little fellow, how long was he ill?' 'He never was ill at all, please your ladyship,' says I, 'he was drowned one day in June, in the river by the old Water Mill.' Up she jumped, all white and scared, while Sir Leopold cried, 'Esther, be composed, my dear; there is no need for you to excite yourself over it.'

"This quieted her like, and she said, 'I was under the belief that my baby died of some ailment, but being away at the time, I suppose I have confused the sad story.' I saw the tears trickling down her face, and, much as I disliked her for her conduct to you and the child, Miss Renie, I could not help feeling sorry. She seemed to be regretting

having left him so heartlessly as she did. I often have mentioned that to Frost lately. So I just told her the rights of the case, and Sir Leopold sitting there looking at me. I thought they should both know how it was a stranger ruled in that house. I told how you had cared for him, and the great grief it was to you, and my lady cried bitterly. I then left the room, seeing I was not wanted any longer, but before I got the door closed I heard my lady exclaim—

"'Oh, Leopold! how could you tell me such a lie?' I did not want to hear no more, you know, Miss Renie, because I know my manners better, I hope, after serving in your family all my life. But I make no doubt but that her husband had told her that not to wound her feelings, and may be he did not know himself, for every one has been very silent to them, Miss Renie?"

Renie seemed very perplexed.

"I scarcely think that possible, Mrs. Troost.

I am nearly sure Mr. Chalmers would tell him how the accident happened when they met. But I cannot be certain what Lady Gunstan Rudkin was told, it was again Mr. Chalmers who apprised her of it. I did not write, I did not even know her address. Perhaps he might not enter into details to *her*, the child's mother ; but why Sir Leopold should tell her such a deliberate falsehood as that he died of some sickness, is past my comprehension. Do you think they are happy? Do they keep much company ?"

"No, not much ; Dr. Bacup and his wife come pretty nearly every week, and then Sir Leopold has bachelor parties, mostly gentlemen from town. But they are quiet, and keep no regular company like we used to do in the old time, Miss Renie. I believe they are happy, and they make a very handsome couple, too. My lady seems quite led by Sir Leopold."

It was now after nine, and Mrs. Troost

roused Frost, who, as usual, was sitting with his head bent deep in thought.

"Come now, Frost, my lady and Sir Leopold won't be much after ten, I don't expect, though Mrs. Howard does not get her parties over early. Why did you not go, Miss Renie; the two Mr. Steels are there, so Joe told me?"

"They had not the power to attract me, Mrs. Troost. They are far too conceited to take my attention; they want taking down such a deal that it would require myself, the Countess, and several others to do it. They are painfully insipid young men. But I did not feel disposed to go, and it is well I did not, as you would have had to come some other night."

"So we should; it is for the best," replied Frost. "And you will help me, Miss Renie?"

"Yes, Frost, I will; though I do not embrace your opinion entirely. It is too fanciful."

"You smile, Miss Renie; well, I am glad you can; I carn't, it has grown into my heart, and is eating it away. But I shall be only too pleased to be shown that it is fancy."

CHAPTER VII.

Renie saw the old couple to the door, and then returned to the sitting-room. It made her shiver and tremble, the recollection of that story, now they were gone, and every shadow the firelight made on the coloured wall caused her to start. We may excuse her, I think; she had had plenty to make her nervous of late, poor girl, and no one to take half the burden for her; no one to talk to or confide in. Certainly Lucy was at hand, but then she was married, and it is not every wife who can keep a secret from her husband. And

Renie could not fancy good-natured Carl going about in horrified bewilderment, with his mouth full of the dreadful story. In all probability he would make a voyage to the nursery and blow it all into the pretty pearly ears of Miriam Ruth, regardless of the presence of the nurse. So there she sat and thought till her brain reeled. It was a dark, doubtful story; one not easy to get people to believe. She imagined Norman's horror when she told him, and the suspected murderer had actually eaten at his table the night before. And supposing he had not gone to China, why then?—but there was the shipping list, that told truth; and, with a sigh of relief, Renie rose and rang the bell.

"Christie, attend to this lamp."

On her return the girl drew the curtains and made up the fire.

"Shall I bring the tray here, ma'am, as you are alone?"

"Yes. Do you know what time Miss Priscilla will return?"

"No, Miss Renie. Please let me make your cocoa, you look so poorly."

"I don't feel it, and I prefer making it for myself. Who is that I heard talking in the kitchen?"

"Black, the new butcher, ma'am."

Renie smiled.

"Christie, I hope you'll look before you leap. I suppose he comes to see you? Black, I fear, is not steady. But, there, don't cry, if you are satisfied I am; I only speak for your good; go along."

Christie was not slow to do that, and I don't fancy many tears were shed on the other side of the door where the cheery tones of the Black in question could he heard talking to Nurse Mary.

Once more alone Renie's first care was to write a note to Mr. Chalmers, asking him to

run down. She did not intend to tell Norman till after Mr. Chalmers had been consulted; the fewer who knew of it the better.

The kettle had for some time been giving off its pent up feeling in smoke and song, and a particularly agonizing cry induced Renie to take pity on it and make her cocoa. Hardly had she done so, when the knocker put in it's voice, and Christie hurried to open the door for Miss Trufit.

That lady made her way at once to the little room, and, sitting down with her feet close to the fire, launched out into a full, true, and particular account of the evening's doings.

Don't say that old ladies like to be quiet; it is not the case. They enjoy a little gaiety more than many a young one. At any rate, Miss Priscilla did; these parties were to her just charming, and Addy a darling. She made the little old lady beautiful caps and

laces, and told her every time she intended getting anything new. So now Miss Trufit felt pity for Renie because she had been debarred from seeing some of the most charming toilettes she had ever beheld. She felt it incumbent upon her to describe them to Renie, who sat staring alternately into the creamy cocoa, and into the fire, and wishing Miss Priscilla was at the bottom of the sea.

Mrs. Howard and Lady Rudkin were the belles of the room. Miss Fanny Manners was certainly very pretty, but then her face was full of little holes when you looked into it. Miss Priscilla here stroked her own soft cheek complacently, and charitably supposed it was a species of leprosy, which effectually settled poor Miss Fanny Manners.

They all passed through the fire, poor things, and the only two that came forth unscathed were Mrs. Howard and Lady Gunstan Rudkin. Addy had worn a rich,

dark dress of ruby silk, trimmed with velvet of a deeper shade, while Lady Rudkin came in a rose satin ornamented with deep white lace and pearls. Miss Trufit said it was exquisite, and she never saw her look so well. Sir Leopold was truly a distinguished man, and they were a strikingly handsome couple.

Renie heaved a great sigh. Was the little old lady never going to bed? was she going to talk about *that* man much longer? If so, Renie began to doubt her powers of endurance.

"How do you think this coiffure suits me, Renie?" inquired the vain little dame presently, giving her head a bridle.

Renie looked for the first time at the article in question. It was composed of the softest white net and lace, and a faint sprinking of delicate mauve, all gathered into the most unstudied folds, to be held in check by the diamond star on the top of the pretty white head.

"It suits you very well," replied Renie, moving wearily and glancing at her watch.

It was only two minutes off eleven.

"I wish you had been there to-night, my dear; the people all asked after you, and Mrs. Maples asked me whatever you did, shut up so much."

A red spot came into the pale cheeks. That was rather a tender subject; Renie did not care to have it known that she was poor and had to exert her talent to add to her small income. She was not ashamed of working, for that matter she would have scrubbed floors had God given her strength, but she did not like explaining her business to everyone to be talked and gossipped about. She shrank from it strangely; hers was a queer feeling, and not readily understood or explained.

"Politely tell Mrs. Maples to attend to her own affairs when next she asks you, Miss Trufit."

"My dear Renie," exclaimed the old lady, "you astonish me. Dear Addy would never have—"

Up started Renie, the Rudkin temper visible in the brown eyes.

"Stop! I know what you are going to say. I don't expect Addy would ever have said such a thing; she would have stayed to consider how it would sound. But I cannot stop to consider; Addy and I are two different people, Miss Trufit, and the like things don't suit us. Mrs. Maples is rather too ready at talking, though I have no doubt you helped her to it. You are very fond of showing sympathy towards me for being so much shut up. It is not needed, Miss Priscilla, and be good enough to remember that the next woman who wants any information must apply to me."

"I am really very sorry, my dear Renie, but I do think you work too hard; you have no idea how ill you look to-night. And when

people ask such questions, what *am* I to say?"

"Nothing, except 'Mind your own business.' But I might as well instruct the cat to say that as you. Your lips and Addy's were never moulded to say rude things, so the best you can do is to keep them shut. And now will you go, please? I am cross."

There was very little doubt of that, and Miss Trufit rose. It was not often Renie lost her temper. But to-night she was worn in mind and body, haunted by a sickening dread, saddened by a silent sorrow. A little time of quiet enabled her to smooth her brow, and then, catching up her candle from the little slab in the passage, she mounted the steep narrow stairs after Miss Priscilla. She tapped at the door, which was opened by that lady in her nightcap.

"Miss Trufit, I beg your pardon for speaking as I did just now; I was very much out of temper. Good-night."

"Good-night, my dear," replied the old dame, with dim eyes.

She appreciated Renie, if no one else did, and as she heard her door shut she shook her head to herself in the glass. She had deep proofs of Renie's sincerity and goodheartedness, though not three kind words did she say in a month, and never kissed her. But she knew the true heart, the real worth that was hidden under that cold manner; she knew how different *her* life would be but for that firm, steady girl who made her home as comfortable as she could, and bidding her welcome to what she had, did her daily work without a murmur. She knew that Renie was a puzzle; that her mind took her where *she* could not hope to follow, but it never paralysed the willing hand or narrowed the generous mind. Frank, true hearted, hopeful, industrious, she lived, and so she—died!

The next day Renie told Miss Trufit that she had asked Mr. Chalmers down on the

morrow. Miss Trufit hoped he would stay; possibly some might have thought that these meetings would prove too much for the lawyer, and he would invite Renie to be Mrs. Chalmers. But no such idea entered Miss Trufit's pate; matrimony and Renie were two things, in her opinion, widely apart.

Renie did not even take her accustomed walk that Thursday and Friday; she was too much in need of rest. Sleep she could not with that on her mind, and, towards the close of the dreary November day, she anxiously watched for the arrival of Mr. Chalmers. She was obliged to appeal to him; he was the only learned man of her acquaintance, and, moreover, he had assured her he would always readily give her any assistance in his power; and now she was putting him to the test.

By the afternoon train he arrived; it was close upon four when he knocked, and was met on the threshold by Miss Trufit. He,

like a prudent man, asked no question of her, but hoped Miss Rudkin was well.

"Not very; I am afraid, Mr. Chalmers, I think I must get the Countess to talk to her. Renie is so dreadfully reserved, you have no idea. We are all strangers to her to-day, though no one would credit it."

The lawyer looked as if *he* could credit it without any difficulty, but assented to the old lady's remark.

"I'll just go and tell Miss Rudkin you are here, but you are not going back *this* week, Mr. Chalmers."

He smiled.

"You are very kind, but I shall be better able to say to-morrow, Miss Trufit."

"Renie, my dear, Mr. Chalmers is here."

"Is he? Well, will you see if he will take any refreshment before tea, and, if not, ask him to come here."

Miss Trufit did as requested, and brought him to the little side room.

"I suppose I am to be excluded from all private matters, Renie?"

"Yes, Miss Trufit, you are."

She at once smilingly retired, and Mr. Chalmers broke into a laugh.

"You deal with her very decidedly, Miss Rudkin?"

"Yes, I find it the best plan; I don't believe in too many cooks, they generally spoil the broth, Mr. Chalmers; and we cannot have any spoiling in this case."

They drew closer to the fire, and the lawyer waited for Renie to commence her explanation.

Franklin Chalmers had a quick eye, and he was not slow to perceive that Renie looked anxious and haggard. Miss Trufit thought it was poor health, but he saw the ailment was a troubled mind.

With a voice low enough to baffle all listeners, and a face of still pain, Renie

clearly repeated, word for word, Frost's awful story. When she finished Mr. Chalmers took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

"Good God, Miss Rudkin, this is a fearful business; never heard of such a thing before, and it is most puzzling."

"It is; it cannot be treated lightly; whatever steps are taken must be well considered. I have not told my brother-in-law; I wanted to hear your advice. How are we to proceed?"

"Proceed? I know no more than Adam. We certainly *cannot* proceed with the evidence in hand; it is no evidence at all. We cannot accuse Sir Leopold of murdering the late baronet on the strength of the old servant's story, which, in all probability, is half the work of a fevered and imaginative mind. The finger of suspicion points to *two*, Miss Rudkin; only that the one supposition is more

revolting than the other, and I should be sorry to lay hold of it. The present Lady Gunstan Rudkin, then Lady Rudkin, stands in rather a bad light. The attending changes and events are queer, and anyone would at once suppose that she had some hand in the matter. Cannot the man Frost be pacified."

"No, he told me distinctly that if I would not take the matter up for him he would place it in the hands of the police. And just consider, Mr. Chalmers, the awful consequences?"

"By Jove, yes; it is better in our hands than theirs; they'd have your uncle up, poor old gentleman, in a twinkling, if they thought his bones would tell them anything. It is strange; that story told by the Countess Helring, of which Frost knows nothing, is decidedly black. He must, if it was he, have been hunting for the will, which I had carried off with me, and then Lady Rudkin being previously acquainted with him! Yet we are

not sure of any of these things, it is all supposing, and that won't stand a charge of murder. We must *prove* something before we can go to work. And the thought of publicity is terrible, Miss Rudkin; it would almost set the world dancing, such a tragic romance in connexion with one of the oldest families in England. Bless my heart and soul, we must manage better than let it get afloat. You have not told any one, you say?"

"No, not a creature."

"That's a good job. I should like to see this old man and woman, and also Mr. Howard. Could it be managed to-night?"

"To-night! I don't know, but I can see."

"I wish you would, because I ought to leave here to-morrow; but I will see you well through with this business, Miss Rudkin, never fear. Really, taking all the items into consideration, it seems a pity to deprive

the courts of it, it would make such a grand case."

Renie shook her head as she wrote a note to Mrs. Troost. She could not appreciate the several features that the man of law did. To her it was simply horrible, nothing more. With the note in her hand she entered the kitchen and found one of the fishermen's children standing with some fresh mackerel at the door, talking to Mary.

"Tim, stay a second, I want you to go an errand for me. Take the fish, Mary, and do some for tea. Christie, put your bonnet on and take this note to your aunt; make haste."

Christie went to get ready, and Renie proceeded to write to Norman.

"Dear Norman,—

"Will you come over as soon as you get this, I mean after your dinner. It is

most important; Mr. Chalmers is here. If you can leave Addy at home, do; if not, bring her to sit with Miss Trufit.

"Ever yours,

"RENIE."

Tim was waiting, but Christie had gone when Renie got back.

"How's the baby to-day, Tim?"

"Better, thank you, ma'am; mother told me to say the stuff you sent did it a power of good."

"I am pleased to hear it, and now take this note to Beach Cliff, and tell the maid to give it to Mr. Howard at once!"

"Yes, ma'am;" and off flew Tim.

CHAPTER VIII.

When tea was served in all its simple freshness, it was not so much enjoyed by the lawyer as might have been expected after his long journey. As for Renie, she had no appetite of late. Miss Trufit talked and made tea, and sometimes got rather strange replies. At last it was said to be over, and they betook themselves to the drawing-room. Mr. Chalmers had told Miss Trufit that he had come on business, and expected Mr. Howard down shortly. Therefore, when that gentleman

arrived with his wife, Miss Priscilla was quite prepared. Norman's first words to Renie were—

"She would not be left." The "she" was of course Addy, and Renie could not refrain from smiling as she glanced towards her. There was not much fear that she would ever be easily disposed of. The three returned in a few moments, and shut themselves up in the side room.

"Now," exclaimed Norman, flinging himself into a chair, "what's up? Have you been proposing to Renie, and got flustered?"

"No, Norman, if that was all I should not have sent for you. Mr. Chalmers, will you tell my brother-in-law? Mrs. Troost and Frost cannot be long?"

It was easier said than done; either Norman would not understand or Mr. Chalmers was not expert at the work. At any rate Renie had to come to the rescue, with some

of her round telling speeches that left no doubt behind them, and together they succeeded in making Norman Howard's hair stand up, after the manner of Mr. Pecksniff's. He rose and sat down again half a dozen times in his horror and bewilderment, and assured Mr. Chalmers and Renie over and over again that he could make neither head nor tail of the story.

"Well, I don't think Miss Rudkin or myself are quite so bad as that. If he *did* murder Sir Bevis, it must have been for the sake of the estate, and *then* there was the child, to be sure."

"Mr. Chalmers, do you think Sir Leopold ever did go to China?"

The two men started.

"He must have gone, or he never could have come back, and I saw his name given in the 'Russia's' list of passengers. But I see what is in your mind, *when* he went."

"There was enough time for him to get to China after the death of the little heir."

"This is awful, Miss Rudkin, what put *that* into your head?"

"I don't know; the Countess was the first to express a doubt, and then Frost said as much the other night."

"What? do you mean to say that Lucy suspects him of having to do with the poor little lad's end?"

"No, Norman, you don't understand. No one knows anything of this but ourselves; but Lucy, strange to say, never liked Sir Leopold. She declared it was his face at the window, and he she saw in the study. I never credited it, but it seemed so queer that those two should have met, that Lucy expressed her doubt as to whether he had ever been to China. And it made me think."

"Well, it is a most complicated affair for me to understand; I never was good at

romancing; it is the same as relationship, I always get flabbergasted. But I perceive one thing, that he is suspected of *two* murders, and surely that is enough for anyone."

Neither Mr. Chalmers nor Renie could help smiling at Norman's face of woe, and yet it was no smiling matter.

Before either one or the other could resume the conversation, Christie appeared, and informed them that her aunt and Mr. Frost were in the kitchen.

"Quite right, Christie; tell them to come in."

The couple entered softly, and seemed afraid to speak, till Renie told them that Mr. Chalmers and Mr. Howard already knew.

"And now, my man," said Chalmers, turning to Frost, "I want you to repeat to me what you told Miss Rudkin."

Frost, in no wise disconcerted, proceeded to relate his story, and Renie could have said,

had she been asked, that it had neither decreased nor increased since he had told it to her. There was something very impressive and real in the sorrow of the old man; he did not strive to do anything beyond getting at the truth, he said no harsh words of any one.

"Frost, do you really and honestly believe in your own mind that Sir Bevis Rudkin met his death at the hands of your present employer, Sir Leopold?"

"Mr. Howard, sir, if this was the last time I should have the power of speech I would say I believe my dear master did not die a natural death, and I believe that if Sir Leopold did not do it he had something to do with it."

Mr. Chalmers gave his head two or three nods and compressed his lips.

"This man Bacup, he must be seen after. Your story, Mrs. Troost, of her idea of the

boy's death, shows plainly that her husband must have deceived her. I wrote to announce his death, but I did not say how it came about, I spared her that. And now this suspicion that Lady Rudkin knew Sir Leopold before her marriage with the deceased baronet, what grounds have you for that?"

"I cannot define them, Mr. Chalmers; they originated, as I before told you, with the Countess. But if you have no objection I will have Nurse Mary in and get her to tell you something that occurred one day in the nursery."

"Yes, Miss Renie," exclaimed Mrs. Troost, "that's a lucky idea, I never heard the rights of that story."

"Nor I, only I suspected at the time that Mary knew more than she told."

The rights of the story were given by Nurse Mary. Renie was correct, she had known more than she said. The mysterious letter,

over which Shepperton and the French girl, Sedorice, had the battle, was none of Shepperton's. Mary had looked over her shoulder as she sat trying to read the address in the rocking chair. It was my lady's writing, and addressed to Mr. Gunstan, at some place in Wales, which Mary could not read. How it came to drop out of my lady's pocket was a puzzle, unless she had been getting her old letters back from him.

Mary stated her opinion openly, and her great dislike to Lady Rudkin. The plot was thickening, and poor Norman groaned aloud. The evidence was flowing in fast enough now to overcome even Mr. Chalmers' scruples.

"Well, I am sorry to say that it will be, I fear, necessary to accuse Sir Leopold of either murdering or being privy to the murder of your late uncle, Miss Rudkin. I had not the least idea—"

A curious sound at the window caused them

to turn, but nothing met the eye save a straggling limb of a creeper that kept flapping against the casement, and Mr. Chalmers continued his speech. But it was again interrupted by a sound, and this time in the kitchen. Christie's voice could be heard remonstrating with someone who persisted. The kitchen was next to the little room.

"Mary, see what it is," said Renie.

The woman at once obeyed, and opened the door, but, immediately starting back, gasped, "Who are you?"

The question was a natural one, and so they all thought, as with one accord they crowded to the door to look. In the passage stood a figure huddled into a thick wrap which prevented any of the face being seen, save the eyes, which expressed great fear. Holding by the garments of this creature was Christie, repeating—

"I could not help it, ma'am; she would come in."

The wild eyes sighted Renie's face between Norman Howard and Mary's shoulders, and with a quick cry of "Lady" she jerked her petticoat out of Christie's grasp, and crossed to Renie. They all drew back.

"Althea!" exclaimed Renie, "is anything the matter?"

"Yes, I want to speak, lady."

She cast her eyes into the little room, and made a move as if she would enter. There was something odd in the eagerness of the girl, and Renie said—

"Come in, then, and speak."

She had been expecting this visit, for Althea had promised to see her before they went away, but this night of all nights it was untimely. Addy's clear laughter could be heard as the door was closed once more; the noise consequent upon the arrival of the gipsy girl had not reached the little drawing-room.

Mrs. Troost and Mary drew as far from the wild looking object as possible, and Frost,

startled into a recollection of his native tongue, murmured something which sounded very like "Uncanny thing."

But it was soon evident that the girl wanted as little to do with them as they did with her. After one rapid glance round the room she appeared to forget their existence, and addressed herself entirely to Renie. She shook her head when asked to sit down, and kept near to the door, with one hand on the handle. Her eyes adhered to the carpet faithfully, with the exception of a swift look into Renie's face from time to time throughout the hurriedly told story. She did not give any lengthened account, she merely supplied the outline, and the filling in was left to the listeners. Probably some remarks might have been made at the onset, had not they all been taken aback at sight of the apparition. It seemed too strange to be true, and Mr. Chalmers seated himself resignedly, intending

to understand as much as he could of whatever was about to be disclosed.

"Lady, when the moon rises we start. I came to say farewell, for Althea will never return to this cold land more; she does not wish it. You have been kind to us, lady, and now you are in trouble. I know you are; I was at the window just now and heard you," nodding in the direction of Mr. Chalmers "speak. I must speak, I must, I *will;* you shall not hang him, though he has broken my heart." Tears were chasing each other down the beautiful face. "*He* (with a wave of the hand in the direction of Zeigleheath) did not kill the old man." She stopped all astonishment on the part of her audience with a solemn "Hush!—I had not seen him for a long time; he told me it was too cold to come often to the Coppice-gate, and I began to sicken for a sight of his beautiful face. I loved him so. He said he loved me, and called me his 'Pretty wild bird.' At last,

one night after father had said we were going, I crept up to the big house in the darkness, and looked if I could see him. All the rooms in the front were shut, and I could not see, but there were two round at the side with the windows open, and I climbed up and looked in. They were empty as far as I could see, but in a moment a fair woman like an angel came in and stood listening, then *he* came, and I saw them kiss each other and speak. I heard her call him Leo. If my hands had only been round her white neck then, I should have squeezed the life out." The girl's rage was now freely displayed, but no one offered any interruption, the story had become too interesting. "I watched silently, and saw them kiss for the third time and go out, him first and her soon after. I was crying, but through my tears I presently saw a shadow on the side wall, and looking opposite I saw the white head of an old man through a doorway, and after a second he drew it in. I was curious

to see what he wanted, so I went to the next window, and there I saw the same old man writing at a table; he finished his writing and fastened it with red stuff, and then leaned his face in his hands. I was so sorry for him; his hair was the same as my mother's, like snow, and I began to cry again, this time for him as well as for myself. I think he cried too. He opened a drawer in the table and considered for a moment, then he drew his hand out, and I saw something shine in it. He turned his chair to the window and smiled; he took off the white thing round his neck and plunged what he had in his hand into his throat. I was sick and giddy then, and fell down. When I got better it was snowing, and I ran home. I dared not venture to the big house any more after that, but watched at the gate for Leopold. I thought he must love me because he told me so. But he never came, and father journeyed again. When we came back, I found he had married the fair

woman and was living there. I prayed to die, always, always, and then mother died, and you came, lady, and asked me why I was sad, and I said I would tell you before we went, because you were kind. But you will not let them hurt *him;* I loved him once, I love him now! Lady, I have told the truth, he did not kill the old man."

The girl had sunk on her knees at Renie's feet, with her sweet face upturned to ask mercy for her base lover. The story of her blighted affection was bitter to her proud heart to tell, but she had sooner anything than he should be harmed; the tale had evidently been wrung from her to protect Sir Leopold Rudkin.

The silence was profound, the poor girl crouched on the floor, and gave a painful sob ever and anon.

It is impossible to describe the feelings of those assembled in the room; throughout the

story they had all sat as if petrified, but one pang was gone from all, and that was to know the poor old man had not been murdered. It was one dread the less.

"Althea, get up," said Renie, forcing herself to speak.

The girl did so, but immediately covered her face with her shawl, as if ashamed. Mr. Chalmers put one or two questions to her, but she made no reply, save a sad shake of the head. Plainly she had told all she had to tell, and would say no more. Her eye wandered to the door, the handle of which she kept turning.

Renie divined her desire.

"You want to go, Althea? Well, if you will not tell us any more you may. But you are sure what you have said is true?"

"Quite, lady; and the Blessed Virgin knows it. I *saw* it. Lady, good-bye."

She snatched one of Renie's hands and

pressed it to her lips, then opened the door and darted out through the kitchen, making Christie Parnell give a shrill little squeak of terror.

CHAPTER IX.

The first sound uttered in the little room after Althea's departure was a long-winded prayer by nurse Mary, during which she devoutly displayed only the whites of her eyes, and to which Frost and Mrs. Troost answered amen. Mr. Chalmers made an effort and rose. He glanced at Renie and then at Norman.

"This is a most extraordinary business altogether. You are aware of the need of silence; you perceive our first impression is incorrect? Now it is entirely a *family* affair?

and if the matter is to be pushed further it can only be done by the desire of the family."

The lawyer addressed himself to the three old servants, who, at the conclusion, rose. They were quite overwhelmed by the turn events had taken. The idea that their master had killed *himself* was the last thing that would ever have occurred to them, and in a rather crestfallen manner they returned to the kitchen. Then the three remaining tongues were let loose. Horror and amazement came first then.

"What is to be done now?"

Mr. Chalmers shrugged his shoulders.

"It is for you and Miss Rudkin to decide, Mr. Howard. The question is now who caused his suicide, and for what reason? We now see why Sir Leopold and Dr. Bacup carried the body upstairs, and why none of the old servants were permitted to touch their master. Because they would have discovered

that his throat was cut. I am quite amazed. I never should have dreamt of such a thing as Sir Bevis taking his own life. There was no letter found, such as the girl says he wrote, Miss Rudkin."

"No. I neither saw nor heard of one, and it assuredly was not on the table when I went in. But Sir Leopold and Lady Rudkin, at any rate one, if not both, had been in the room previously, because they brought the news into the drawing-room."

"Oh! Then depend upon it they got the letter. I wonder what was in it? Was your uncle at all low spirited or depressed, Miss Rudkin?"

"Slightly, I thought; and he told me he had got his death-blow. I did not understand him, and he spoke queerly about the child and his wife. Do you think he could have been out of his mind, Mr. Chalmers?"

"No, I don't. Your uncle was sound

enough when last I saw him. It is a most curious thing."

Mr. Chalmers suddenly said — Norman Howard, I should like this affair proceeded with, and I am sure Renie would. It is a matter enveloped in doubt and obscurity, and I cannot meet either Sir Leopold or his wife till it is cleared up. It cannot do much harm to try them on the subject; we have a right to know why they hid the truth. I see now the reason Dr. Bacup's practice increased so suddenly after Sir Leopold came into the estate; he holds the baronet between his finger and thumb. I suppose he made friends with that poor girl at the commencement of his visit, eh, Renie?"

"Yes, it would seem so; I remember Christie telling us how she saw him at the Coppice Gate one night. I remember a great many things now it is too late. But, Norman, this must not be made public; I should not

like the world to know that poor uncle killed himself, and I don't think Addy would. It is such a fearful thing, and it is too late to bring him back. I think we had better let him rest in peace, and not soil his memory, poor old man."

"Yes, I really think Miss Rudkin is in the right, Mr. Howard; it would do no good now. But I can try and extort a confession under the *threat* of punishment, if you like, and perhaps we shall be able to frighten one of the three into telling the truth. If that maid Shepperton could be got at, one might manage her; in general an outsider is more easily terrified than an actor. We can but try."

"Very well; try by all means. But do you suppose even if we maintain secresy, that those three old people will?"

"Yes, I fell sure of that; they were attached to uncle, and they would not go and

say he killed himself for worlds. This is all owing to Frost; but for him we should have gone on believing the cause of death to be paralysis of the heart. I regret that he ever got the idea into his head; these things are better left alone."

There was very little doubt but that Renie was right in the main, at any rate in this instance. Even when people inflict punishment they always suffer, more or less, themselves, and to have brought up Sir Leopold Rudkin would have been to bring up every member of the old family, and make their names a mouthful for everyone for years and years. Nothing could be done for the present, and Addy would be tired of waiting, so they dissolved the counsel. Their faces were hard when they returned to the drawing-room, and Addy inquired whether the ghost was securely laid.

"For the present, yes, Mrs. Howard," replied the lawyer.

"Well, I have been patient, but I intend to know what it is. I won't ask Renie, because *she* never tells anything, but Norman shall explain it to me."

To Renie's unbounded astonishment he at once replied—

"Yes, Addy, I will, and if Renie feels disposed she can do the same by Miss Trufit, eh, Renie?"

Renie did not say whether she felt disposed or not. Perhaps Norman was wise in telling his wife; he could not discard Sir Leopold and Lady Rudkin without explaining the reason to her, and she was just as near to Sir Bevis as Renie, only it did not seem so. Addy's life was a totally different one from Renie's; she was at peace, she had no secrets to carry about day and night. How often did Renie wish that her aunt had died without claiming the relationship. It placed her in a dreadful position, and now Althea, her own cousin, must be the one to tell the bitter,

shameful truth of her uncle's death. It was eleven o'clock when Mr. and Mrs. Howard went home, and more than an hour slipped by before the inmates of Fern Cottage sought repose. It did not come to all three, and when told by Mr. Chalmers in the morning that she looked as though she had passed a sleepless night, Renie answered—

"I have, Mr. Chalmers; I cannot rest, do what I will."

She did not say that a certain artist had anything to do with it.

"I will remain, Miss Rudkin, if you will allow me, till we have made the attempt; I myself feel very anxious and curious about it."

"You are very welcome to stay, Mr. Chalmers, and the sooner it is begun the sooner it will be over. Whom are you going to commence with?"

"Sir Leopold and Lady Rudkin; it is better,

I have considered, to go at once to the fountain head. They may be disposed to tell us what we want to know. I am sending today for a list of names of those who sailed to China before Christmas or during the spring succeeding your uncle's death, Miss Rudkin. We shall then see if Sir Leopold has told the truth."

"I don't believe he has, Mr. Chalmers; I am now upset by fears for that child. You see it was a very little life to stand between him and Zeigleheath!"

"True, very true, but I hope we may not get our fears confirmed. You appear to have a bad opinion of Sir Leopold?"

"Yes, I have; to you I may say it. I never liked him, and he knows it. Yet I had not used to suspect him; I am not suspicious by nature. Besides, the Countess used to take all that out of my hands. *She* believes him equal to doing *anything*."

CHAPTER X.

It was a weary time that, of watching and waiting. Poor old Frost had been so cut up at hearing his master's fate, that he had taken to his bed. Norman told his wife, and on the Saturday afternoon there came a neat little note informing Renie that she was very ill indeed, and would she come over and see her for an hour? Accordingly Renie and Mr. Chalmers made the expedition, and were greeted by Addy with a torrent of tears and reproaches for her sister's unkindness in not

having told her before. The little woman seemed a good deal more hurt at having been excluded from the confidences than at the sad end of her kind relative. Her cry now was "Don't let anyone know." She offered Renie no comfort, no support, though she looked to need it badly; in fact, almost blamed her.

Heart-sick and tired, Renie went home, and resolved that she would go no more to Beach Cliff till it was all over. Mr. Chalmers began to see how it was this girl was a hard, self-possessed woman; her life had been very lonely, she had had to think and act for herself.

The early Monday's post brought the much-desired list. Mr. Chalmers' clerk had made a faithful copy. It was from the middle of October to the end of March. No one had sailed to China by the name of Leopold Gunstan. Mr. Chalmers' countenance was trou-

bled as he communicated the intelligence to Renie.

"He told a lie, Miss Rudkin, there is no question of that; he said he sailed to China immediately after Sir Bevis' death."

"Yes, and it strikes me forcibly that he did not sail till after dear little *Rodney's* death."

"Miss Rudkin, you will make yourself ill."

The tears were falling thick and fast; they failed to come for other than that innocent child, but he had got so close to Renie's heart!

It was a strange deputation that set off to Zeigleheath that morning—Norman, Renie, and the lawyer. The footman told them Sir Leopold had gone out about twenty minutes before with the bailiff, but my lady was at home. They therefore agreed to see my lady, and were shown in. After a lapse of five or ten minutes Lady Rudkin came to them, looking excessively pretty. Her face changed when

she saw the party, and her manner became nervous. She formed a decided contrast to Renie, with her pale placid face. The civilities exchanged were of the briefest and coldest, and then Mr. Chalmers explained their business. As he got further on with the story, carefully suppressing their authority, and making it appear a decided thing, Lady Rudkin entirely lost her self-possession. She was like a person under the influence of a bad dream; she writhed and twisted, while a damp stood on her white brow. She made no attempt to give the story the lie, but kept silence, with the exception of wishing that her husband would come in.

"Send for him, Lady Rudkin; I have also a word to say to him. You remember I wrote to you respecting your child's death?"

A violent shiver shook her ladyship from head to foot, and she put up her hands beseechingly, and cried—

"Don't, don't; for God's sake spare me *that!* I am his mother. Oh! my little baby!"

A passionate flood of tears here came to her aid, and when they were well nigh spent she said—

"You want to know about Sir Bevis's death; how it was you never knew he killed himself. If I tell you, will you not take my husband up for the—the—"

Her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth —she could not say it.

"Go on, Lady Rudkin," said Norman Howard; "if you and your husband confess, we will be merciful to you; if you don't, you know what to expect. I shall send for him."

"Tell your master he is wanted," said Mr. Chalmers to the servant, who answered the bell.

The man seemed rather astonished, and said he would send for him.

Lady Rudkin's lips were now sealed again, but Mr. Chalmers evidently deemed it best to get as much out of her as possible before her husband's arrival, in case his presence should inspire her with hope.

"You need not postpone your narrative, madam; your husband's share is towards the close. Kindly relate how you became acquainted with your present husband before you married our lamented friend?"

She turned to Renie.

"You know, Miss Rudkin."

"Excuse me, Lady Rudkin, I do not."

She did not care about relating it; her gaze wandered round and round the room, but there was no loophole, no means of escape; so getting up she went to a side window, and sat there with her back to them. She kept her face turned, and watched the fresh wind stir and ruffle the beautiful trees. Presently she spoke. It was not talking; it

was as if she read each sentence in the gusts of wind that came every other second.

"My father was left a widower when I was six years old. We were always poor, pinched, and wretched. People called my father a good man, especially after his death. When my father died I went to live with my Aunt Lofgan; she is the only relative I have. She too is poor, and keeps a little boys' school. I was miserable there, but I had to stay. I had no other home, and, moreover, I was engaged to be married to a man who had no business, and only a very little money. But we loved each other, and I was going out to Africa with him only aunt found it out and stopped me. He went, and I never heard from him for a long time; then came a letter telling me of his arrival, and charging me to be faithful to him, for that he would surely come back and find me wherever I hid myself.

"I did not let aunt see the letter, but I made up my mind to go away; I was so tired of teaching all day and mending stockiugs all the evening for ever and ever. I met by accident with a widow; her husband had been a tallow chandler, and had left her rich. She wanted a young person to go about with her, read to, and write for her. I agreed to be that young person for fifteen pounds a-year, and such old clothes as she thought fit to bestow upon me.

"We commenced our travels, and, after trying many places, we finally settled in the grandest hotel at Brighton. My life was a miserable one, and I often wished myself back mending the boys' clothes. Mrs. Birdling never omitted to insult me each day, and always waited till there were plenty of people near. I have frequently heard her explaining my deplorable condition, friendless and penniless, to gentlemen and ladies; the ladies dis-

liked me because I was better looking than themselves. I knew Mrs. Birdling hated me because the gentlemen liked to talk to me, and never noticed her. But she kept me so that she might insult me, and make me blush. After we had been at Brighton some time, Sir Bevis Rudkin came and got rather friendly with us. He was kind, and said he was sorry for me when I told him how wretched I was. He asked me to marry him, and the temptation was too strong for me; I consented to be his wife, though I loved Leopold Gunstan. But the misery of my life was getting more than I could bear, and Leopold was away, and poor into the bargain; if he ever did come back it would be after many years. Meantime, *I* must suffer. So I married the kind old man, and he brought me home here, and I thought I had got to fairyland. Sir Bevis told me I must engage a maid before we came home, and I wrote for Susan

Shepperton, an old servant of my aunt's. She had been in the secret of my love for Leopold Gunstan. I was glad to have Shepperton, because I was not quite easy about Leopold, and I knew she would help me. He said he would find me wherever I went to. I dreaded him coming back and finding me married. All went well for some time, and my baby was born. Then Miss Rudkin came, and after her Miss Northwood, and I began to be afraid of them; they did not seem to like me any better than the old servants did Shepperton. I felt very fidgety, and one night when Miss Northwood was with me in the drawing-room she suddenly saw a face pressed against the glass. She described it to me, and I knew it was Leopold Gunstan's; he had come back. She eyed me strangely, and I left the room. I told Shepperton, and she went out to try and find him, but she could not, so we persuaded

ourselves that it was not he. We watched, but saw nothing till that morning Mr. Gunstan joined us on the terrace. I was almost beside myself when I found out who it was. I did not know anything of Leopold's family, he had never told me more than that his mother was alive. Had I known that he had a claim to this place I would never have married Sir Bevis. And what was worse than anything, he was in the *house* and we had to pass for strangers. He taunted me with having married and put one more life between him and the estates. I asked him to go, and he would not. We used to manage to get stolen interviews now and then, for he made me give him money; he was as poor as ever and just as extravagant. Sir Bevis continued kind to me, and I never guessed he had seen Leopold kiss me, till the night he killed himself. Leopold and I met in the morning room soon after dinner. I did not

know that Sir Bevis was in his study or that the door of communication was open; it was generally shut and locked. We spoke for a few moments, and Leopold kissed me more than once. It was wrong, I know, but he was here in the house, and we loved each other dearly. It seemed like a bad dream to think we were divided. After we had been in the drawing-room some time, I recollected that I had left my scent bottle on the mantel piece in the morning-room when I had stood there talking to Leopold. I went out. Miss Rudkin was playing one of Chopin's waltzes. I have that tune in my head every day.

"I found the bottle, and as I was turning I noticed that the door was open into the study. I went in, not thinking to find any one there. I thought I should have died when I saw Sir Bevis sitting back in his chair dead, with a wound in the side of his neck. Horror kept me silent, for my thoughts

flew to Leopold, and I rushed out, nearly mad.

"How things might have turned out I don't know, perhaps better than they have, if the first person I met as I flew along had not been Leopold. You know how still this great place is at nights, when the servants are at supper and the doors closed. We were quite alone. He caught me by the arm.

"'Essy, for God's sake, what is it?' said he, in a husky whisper.

"I tried to speak, but the words would not come, and I could only point in the direction of the study. He went there, dragging me with him. At sight of Sir Bevis he uttered a horrified exclamation and fearful oath. But he was not terrified like me; his wits were quick. He fastened the door, and then snatched up the letter from the table. It was addressed to Miss Rudkin. It told why he had killed himself, and why he had

left me no power; why I had nothing but what his life was insured for. Because he saw that I loved Mr. Gunstan, and at his death would marry him, therefore he put his child into other hands, and left me poor. He said how he had watched us kiss and call each other Leo and Essy only that night. I was too bewildered to understand anything, but I asked Leopold what he was so angry about.

"'Essy, don't you see you are a beggar; he leaves you what his life was insured for, and he kills himself. That is not a natural death and the company cannot be made to pay; he was a clever old boy, but I can be sharp too. Esther,' and he shook me slightly, I felt all in a maze, 'go and bring Shepperton here with water, towels, and a sponge, quick, and don't be a fool, or all is lost. Remember I have burnt that letter, and there is nothing to prove now that he killed himself. It will

go badly with you and me if we are found here with this dead body. We shall be suspected of murdering him.'

"I heard and understood this. I was wild with terror, but I obeyed Leopold; I could not think for myself, and I listened to him and brought Shepperton.

"They together managed it. They wiped up the blood, bound up his neck, and replaced his cravat. I watched them do it, and when everything was put right Shepperton carried all signs of guilt upstairs. They did not seem in the least upset; they thought of everything, and which would be the best to do. Leopold told me to say nothing, but leave everything to him, and I did. He sent for Doctor Bacup because he was poor and would keep silence if you gave him enough money to make it worth his while, he said. Then we went to the drawing-room—that Miss Rudkin remembers—also what took place

after. Leopold managed everything, as he said he would, and no one was allowed to enter the chamber but Shepperton.

"No fear that I would tell; I could not. I was almost an idiot, for long I dreamt of it night after night. I could not leave Shepperton, because Leopold had told her not to leave me; I was under her care. I was not sorry to go after that quarrel with Miss Rudkin. I was afraid even to look at my child. We went to see Aunt Lofgan first, and then Leopold wrote to me. I went about quietly with Shepperton, and often saw Leopold, till he suddenly went abroad, and when he returned he told me I was not to mention having seen him from the time of Sir Bevis's death to the present. My child was dead, and he was heir to Zeigleheath. I knew it, because Mr. Chalmers had written to me, but I did not know how he died till Mrs. Troost told me, and Leopold was angry with her.

My husband told me after we were married, and on our way here, that my boy had died of some complaint."

Lady Rudkin's voice died away in a low wail of pain, and her face was bowed to her very knees.

Renie noticed how thin she looked, it seemed as though she had aged while telling her story.

CHAPTER XI.

So intent had Lady Rudkin been telling the history that she had not heard the door open. And for the last ten minutes or so her husband had been a petrified listener. He remained standing a few yards from the door, with Norman Howard a barrier between him and his wife. Whether Lady Rudkin had finished, or only stopped from agony and grief, must be left a question of speculation, for her husband now started forward, exclaiming—

"Esther, are you mad?"

Great drops of perspiration clung to his brow, and his handsome face was livid. Her form was slightly convulsed, as the tones fell upon her ear, but she was well tutored, she must obey even to the end. Was it love or fear that actuated her? Grasping the curtains she dragged herself up, one hand pressed to her temple. How haggard she looked, how wretched!

"Almost, Leopold; but," and she tottered a step forward, and held out her hand as if to appease him. "Leo, I have told all."

"D—— you," hissed Sir Leopold, striking the table a fierce blow, "is it for this I have schemed and plotted? placed my neck almost in the hangman's hands? All this to help you and give you comforts, and you go and turn renegade. Is this your *love*, devil?"

Oaths hot and scorching he flung at the poor terrified creature; there was no staying

the torrent, down it came like burning lava. And when the passion had exhausted him he fell panting on the table, the veins round his temples black and knotted like cords. If ever a man was mad for the time being, that man was Sir Leopold Gunstan Rudkin.

His wife sank on the floor with her hands clapped to her ears, her eyes starting. The other three stood in horror, and voices could be heard at the door. The servants had been roused from their several duties by the unusual noise. Mr. Chalmers opened the door and told them they were not required. It was a never-to-be-forgotten scene that; there was something so withering, so blasting about it that Renie cried, and bent to the poor crushed creature huddled on the floor. While they waited, almost in doubt what to do next, Sir Leopold raised himself, his eyes bloodshot and brow lowering, but now cool and collected. The fiend within him was tired, and had sunk to rest once more.

"She says she has told you *all;* that she cannot have done, because not a living soul knows it but myself. But I will tell it, and then the story will be fully completed. When first I saw who was mistress in this house I laid my plans, but murder was not amongst them; I did not think that needful, considering how old the baronet was. Afterwards I learnt the existence of a child, a son and heir. This slightly disconcerted me; but I could afford to be patient. I had loved for years her who has this day turned against me. I tried to get on, but could not; others prospered—I did not. Nothing suited me but a gentleman's life of ease and plenty. My mother adored me, poor fool! I went abroad for the seventh or eighth time, and when I returned *she*, my promised bride, was the wife of the man whose estate I was heir to. I was invited to visit here, and then came the old man's sudden death. I screened

his suicide to secure the insurance money, because otherwise she would have been destitute.

"Then Miss Rudkin ordered me out of the house, and I went, but not, as I said, to China. I heard how things were going on, from time to time, through Shepperton, and also when she and her mistress left here. There was now only the child between me and a fortune; the devil whispered to me to go in and win. I came down here and lurked about, but Miss Rudkin always kept the boy under her own eye, and I found I had a difficult task in hand. At last my patience was rewarded; I came over from Ealey disguised as usual, and wandered down to the old mill, and on up the river's bank. I came presently within earshot of voices, and, listening, discovered they were those of a child and a female. I crept on, and, peeping between the foliage, I perceived the little

baronet and his nurse Mary. The woman was sitting with her back against a tree, making a wreath, or something of blue bells and soft rushes. The child stood near watching, but presently wandered a little way towards the stream, plucking more blue bells as he went. He was singing to himself some nursery rhymes, and I could hear his baby lisps distinctly:

'Who killed cock robin?
I, said the sparrow, with my bow and arrow.'

"I was close behind him, so I leant forward and, clapping my hand over his mouth, caught him up and bore him to the water's side. The devil had hold of me.

"Somehow he managed to twist his face round, and I saw in the eyes a look of recognition. But for that I might have set him down and made off, but I felt convinced that in spite of my disguise the child knew me. That look sealed his doom, my life was worth

more than his, so I held him under the clear water for a second or so face downwards, and then let him go.

"The rush of water was strong, and the last I saw of him he was being carried off by the current down to the water mill, his bunch of blue bells clasped in his hands. I then cut across; I heard the nurse scream, but I did not stay a second, and arriving at Ealey I left for Lewes by the next coach, and arrived in London by six. I took passage in the 'Maid of Athol,' under the name of Lewis Garland, and we sailed two days after. I knew you would be looking for me, but I deemed it best not to appear too eager. I then came back and went to see her. I warned her not to mention having seen me since I left here. She asked me a great deal about her child, which nearly drove me mad, and I invented a lie—that he had died of measles or chicken-pock. Now you know the

truth, now I am in your power, thanks to my *wife*. What are you going to do with me?"

What, indeed, he might well ask, after owning himself a murderer.

There was a dull sense of horror and loathing in the hearts of each present, that same horror and death-like chill had prevented them interrupting him once during his shameful recital. His wife had evidently suspected him of destroying her child, and he thought she had told that suspicion. One false step makes many. He stood looking at the listeners, his arms folded.

Norman Howard drew a long breath and spoke.

"What part has Dr. Bacup taken in your vile plot?"

"This, and only this, that of keeping his tongue still. He found out the cause of the baronet's death, and I told him he had committed suicide. Whether he

credited it or not, I cannot say. At any rate he did what I wanted him to do—pronounced death to have arisen from an affection of the heart, and held his peace, for which I paid him. But he has got all he will get, and so has everyone—the end is come. And now once again what are you going to do with me? I know what you can do as well as you can tell me, for I have been on the look out for it. You can give me into the hands of justice for drowning Rodney and defrauding the Insurance Company. In the next place, I don't think that within the annals of your memory, or mine either, there has been one case of hanging a man on his own evidence. And you have no witnesses and cannot get any. With respect to the fraud, that is to be divided amongst four, my wife, *then* the wife of the deceased in question, Susan Shepperton, Doctor Sebbley Bacup, and myself. Come, I will strike a bargain with you; I

have lived by bargains all my life, and I may as well die by one. You shall consider which you would rather do; give me up to the law and put the name of Rudkin into the world's mouth for the sake of seeing me punished, or grant me my liberty, on condition that I go away and never set foot on England's shores again, draw no money, and as completely give up all claim to these lands as if I had never known their existence. All I ask for is liberty; I agree to be gone from here by Friday at twelve o'clock. You have turned me out of house and home, exiled me to drag out the remainder of my days in foreign countries, surely that is punishment enough. Will you choose?"

He made no stipulation for his wife, who sat scared and white before him; they might do anything they chose with her, he did not care. The game was up, and he now intended to make as good and agreeable a provision for

himself as circumstances would allow. He was no fool; he had calculated to no loss. He knew the Rudkin pride was centered with redoubled strength in the quiet, determined Renie, and he knew he stood a very good chance of kicking his heels in freedom. It would not sound too well in court, taking it altogether, and so the three considered as they held a conference at the far end of the room. What was gone no judge on the face of the earth could bring back, and this exile seemed as good and fit an ending as could be desired.

He was to have no money, no claim; steps must be taken to insure that, certain agreements signed, and a full declaration, stating why he submitted to banishment. He did not guess that he had only himself to thank for it; he had told what no one else could, and his poor wife was not to blame.

The ways of the devil are many; he is one

day a friend, the next a foe. Yes, they would agree, he must give up his banking book now. He could take his clothes, nothing more. Suddenly his wife started up.

"Are you going to desert me, Leo?"

"Have you not already deserted me? I do not fancy you will care to take the journey I intend to, but get all packed, then if you like to take my way you can, if not, you are at liberty to choose your own. I have nothing to give you but my curse!"

His face was pale, but perfectly void of passion. Mrs. Troost was called in, and old Frost, who was not long out of bed. They had strict orders given them to take charge of everything, pay and dismiss the servants, for Sir Leopold and Lady Rudkin were going away on Friday for an indefinite period. A cheque for the wages was signed, and the book returned to Mr. Chalmers.

The old servants were quite awake; they

read the truth in the faces around. Zeigleheath was to see no more Rudkins within its walls.

Sir Leopold swore not to attempt to leave the house till the Friday morning.

He smiled when he said it. He spoke of his life, how void it had been of peace, especially since he owned Zeigleheath. He seemed to have been expecting to be sent from it an outcast, and he made no murmur.

His wife appeared stricken; he did not. The first shock over, he turned his quick wits to making as neat a job of it as possible, and her grief had not power to reach him. As for shame, he had never been troubled by that feeling. He treated the affair purely as a business transaction, and that he had only done what was fair and just. A queer notion some people have of justice. They will have some difficulty in passing through the last court.

With no words of farewell the audience broke up; they heaved a great sigh of relief as they stepped out into the cold air. It was a terrible finish, and Norman Howard fairly groaned. But Renie had no thoughts left to carry her beyond that bright June morning when the little lad's fresh young life was so ruthlessly cut off by that monster's hand.

That mystery was cleared up, and Renie almost wished it had remained a mystery; she liked better to think of her boy falling in accidentally than being carried like a lamb to the slaughter, and no one nigh to snatch him from his murderer's hand.

Oh! it was cruel! cruel!

The intervening days were spent in silence and horror. Mr. Chalmers hastened to London, and returned with several learned brethren and legal documents.

Fern Cottage was constantly full, the story was only told to relations and near

friends, amongst which were the Count and Countess.

Mrs. Howard did nothing but weep, poor little soul, till Norman was almost frantic for fear she should be ill. It was ten times worse than the death of Minnie. But it could not be kept a secret for ever; the money must be returned to the Insurance Company—no Rudkin could be a party to fraud. And then when the master and mistress never came back? Ah, well, there was yet another way out of the difficulty.

CHAPTER XII.

The Friday morning came and all was ready. Only Mrs. Troost, Frost, and another female remained in the house; the rest had gone, and lady Rudkin took no maid. Mr. Chalmers and Norman Howard were there to see them off, the murderer and his wife. The villagers had already begun to talk about all the servants being dismissed. Mother Rumour will trot about. It wanted half an hour to the time they were to leave for the train.

"Where do you think of going?" inquired Mr. Chalmers, when all was settled.

"Well, that is a question of doubt at present; indeed, it is generally enveloped in mystery, but I suppose it will be determined before long; I don't anticipate an intermediate state. But I see the time approaches when I must take my departure, and having a little matter to attend to, I must beg you to excuse me. I regret not seeing Miss Rudkin; her face I should like to have seen before I commenced my journey. She is a brave girl, she inspires one with hope continually. Good-bye, good-bye."

He immediately left the room, and Norman remarked to Mr. Chalmers that he was quite free from shame or regret at leaving Zeigleheath.

Presently Lady Rudkin entered ready dressed, looking worn and sad. The two men were sorry, yet they blamed her. She loved her husband, that was clear, or she would never have consented to go with him after

hearing his confession. She was weak and beautiful, easily led, else perhaps things might have been very different that Friday morning. She had taken him for better or for worse, but she had certainly got the worst, poor thing.

"You seem ill, Lady Rudkin, are you fearful of going abroad?"

"No, Mr. Howard, I should like to go where Leo goes, but I met him just now on the stairs and he told me he did not know that he should take me, he did not think I should like it. Don't you think I ought to go, Mr. Howard?"

"Yes, certainly, Lady Rudkin, if you wish it, though, under the circumstances, no one would expect you to accompany him. Remember, madam, should you repent it when you get out, come back. We will do what we can for you if you require it."

That was just like good, kind Norman.

He was actually sorry for both, and ready to pardon them (had it been in his power) now his anger was exhausted.

Renie used to frequently think him too forgiving; he did not use sufficient caution; when we *know* people not to be upright in their dealings we ought to take care and have none with them in future. But Norman Howard did not understand that theory, much less practise it; with him it was at the end of four days after discovering how he had been cheated.

"Ah, well, poor fellow! I suppose he was led away, or he meant to pay it back," and the wrong was forgiven.

One portion of Holy Writ seemed stamped on Norman's heart:—

"Forgive others, as ye would that I should forgive you."

"I wish I had some of Norman's charity."

The time wore on, and wheels sounded.

The carriage was to take the master and mistress to the station (they were to commence their banishment with becoming state), and still no master appeared.

"I daresay your husband has forgotten the time Lady Rudkin; will you remind him?"

"Yes, Mr. Chalmers."

She left the room with a weary step, and a few moments after a terrible cry echoed through the deserted house; there was a moment for flight, and then the cause became apparent. On the floor of his bedroom was stretched Sir Leopold Rudkin lifeless, his hand grasping a small bottle labelled Prussic Acid.

He had indeed gone on an uncertain journey.

His wife was insensible. There was a fearful commotion and bustle to get medical aid, but it was useless; life had been extinct some time. He must have taken it directly after meeting his wife.

All the arrangements were valueless now; the estate was once more masterless, and lost to the Rudkins for ever. There was no heir to seek it; it must now go to the Crown.

It took some little time to get the horrible truth realized and affairs settled. There was no need to tell what had prompted the sudden trip abroad. The coroner gave out at the inquest that the deceased had taken poison while in a state of mental derangement, and the funeral was gone through with appropriate grandeur.

The papers had a melancholy account of the self-destruction of Sir Leopold Gunstan Rudkin, Baronet, of Zeigleheath, Sussex. It mentioned his travels, and added that probably the quiet life he had led since his succession to the title had preyed upon his mind. He died without issue. It was worded well, and looked very imposing, and the world believed it was the truth; things

had righted themselves, and it was easier for others.

Lady Rudkin was again a widow, and staying at Fern Cottage till she got well. The shock of her husband's death had been followed by a severe illness, through which Renie and Mary had nursed her. She was an altered woman; even half her beauty was gone, and she was very grateful for the kindness shown her.

Her plans were only just being laid; she wanted someone to think for her. And that one proved to be Renie. She had no money, not a penny; her husband had saved nothing out of the income, and the two hundred a year was gone. Return to her aunt she did not feel disposed to, so she must work for her own living, that was clear.

Renie could not afford to maintain her in idleness at Fern Cottage, had she liked her well enough.

A governess she was not competent to be, so she must return to her old post, that of a companion. Hers had been a queer life—perhaps she might find another husband; but, as Norman Howard observed, it was to be hoped he would not commit suicide.

Some little time elapsed before a situation offered itself, and the widow entered upon it as Mrs. Gunstan. At first she could not settle to the life of a dependent after being a lady of title, but as no one came forward and offered her a home she got more contented, and showed every probability of staying. The last month had been so trying and exciting that it was not till the widow was gone and Mr. Chalmers back in London as a fixture that Renie could return to her duties. The place seemed dull and strange, the great house was empty and forgotten; emblems of its pride and greatness met the eye at every point, but it could never regain its position—it had outlived its masters. They—hard,

cold, stern men—were laid in the family vault; the last of the proud race was a girl living in a cottage a life of genteel poverty, and a poor struggling artist away in foreign lands, whose relationship to the proud race must never be owned, could it have been proved, or the world persuaded to accept it as truth. It seemed too improbable a story. And this was the end of their greatness, this was what they had come to with all their money.

Was it God's wrath? possibly. Had they given a few more kind words, a little more peace, help and blessings to those around, theirs had not been the sad, solitary end it was. The curse of their forefathers had clung to them—they had not tried to smother it by good deeds or kindness—and it had endured as long as they, and brushed them off the face of the earth.

Once again in working order, and Renie bethought herself of the gipsy king's

mysterious package that she was not to open for two days after their departure. It was many two days since, but it could not be harmed by keeping, so she opened it.

Two things were in it—a bank note for forty pounds to pay the doctor's bill, and a hoop ring of large pearls, the only bit of jewellery Clorinda Rudkin had taken from her home when she ran off with Aaron Sebastain.

It caused Renie some little pain to see and handle the poor dead creature's ring, but she resolved to honour it—it was all in the shape of a heirloom that had drifted *her* way. Addy, of course, asked when she saw it on her finger—

"Where did you get that, Renie?"

"I had it given to me by a friend, Addy; a stranger to you."

The same answer she gave everyone, and at last they ceased asking her.

CHAPTER XIII.

The winter passed away cheerless and cold. There was plenty to do and many changes, one of the most astonishing being the marriage of old Frost and Mrs. Troost. They had both saved some money, so they wisely considered that put together it would go further than if kept in separate portions. So they agreed to marry, and take a little shop, and sell stationery, needles, tapes, &c.

It was not a bad idea, and they soon perceived the wisdom of the step, for all the

gentry for miles round patronised the old couple, and in the long dark evenings they drew close round the fire and detailed over again to each other, and, occasionally, to a discreet and trusty friend or two, the awful history of the fall of Zeigleheath, and the prominent part they had played in it.

On New Year's day there came a letter from the artist, Rufus Sebastain. Renie had told him of the change, and, after commenting upon it, he spoke of coming home shortly, as soon as ever he could manage it. The letter was like its predecessor, quiet and peaceful, and the writing was more weak and nerveless. He said his health was very indifferent, and he could not now work for long together.

Renie wished he would return, and she asked him to do so in a kind sisterly manner, and Miss Trufit should make a cure of him. She dared not betray her feelings for him; he

evidently had no such thought, and she would rather anything than frighten him from her by one uncautious phrase.

Spring set in and May-day dawned. The Count's horses were like the rest decked with ribbons, and Lucy sent baby over to see Renie. She was a perfect little spring flower herself, so soft and white. She crowed and wagged her little head most knowingly; her papa had taught her a great number of funny tricks, and she had all his sprightliness and vivacity. A charming little lady was Miriam Ruth Helring.

Tea over, and Renie strolled into the garden to see how her flower seeds were coming up.

All along the hedge she had sown sweet and everlasting peas, also nasturtiums, while round the fruit trees before the dining-room window were scarlet-runners. Other flowers were well distributed about, and when the bedding out plants came no garden promised

to look prettier than that belonging to Fern Cottage.

The air was still, and the sound of merriment and music came up from the village. The villagers were dancing round the May-pole, and having a series of games. Renie almost envied those rustic maidens their light hearts and buoyant spirits; she felt as old and tired as many a woman at forty.

It required more than an ordinary amount of affection and reverence to help thinking just a trifle hardly of her uncle, who had let her toil her youth away; she ever remembered him a stern unbending man, methodical in his habits, and most self-denying. His sense of justice was strong, and he liked those best who showed their metal and helped themselves.

Renie had satisfied him in this respect, and what had come of it? certainly an independence, but a certainty that so long as she lived

and required more than absolute necessaries she must work for them. She stood leaning on the little gate and listening to a fiddle squeaking to the extent of its power "Jock o' Hazeldean." The boys and girls had got tired of footing it on the green, and the musician was entertaining them with a solo. It would not keep light more than an hour, and Renie thought she would just idle till the lamp was lighted. She felt a desire to stand and gaze down the lane.

A thrush on the opposite thorn was trilling a plaintive song to its mate; some wretched boys had torn the nest with its two pretty eggs out of the bush that afternoon, and the poor things were in sad trouble.

Renie listened, and then turned her head away, her eyes swimming. She was sad enough herself, but yet not so selfish as to be utterly regardless of the sorrows of others, even birds.

When the mist cleared from before her eyes, she perceived a figure coming up the lane, slowly and wearily. There was no elasticity in the step, and the eyes were bent on the ground; at every second step there was a hollow, hacking cough. Something in the white thin face struck Renie as familiar, and she drew back her own, as white as the weary traveller's, and her heart sank within her. Had he come back, and only to die?

She could hear the laboured breath as he came nearer and nearer, and then he stopped, and they looked at each other. She opened the gate with a smile to let him in.

He grasped her cold hand.

"My angel watching for me! Well, I have come home—to die!"

He stood in the centre of the little plot.

"What a peaceful spot! This *is* like home!"

She answered him, though her heart was almost broken; she tried to cheer him, and spoke hopefully of returning health, though she saw and felt no hope herself.

He smiled and shook his head. His face was like a child's, in its sweet, placid expression. He was glad enough to sit down, and Miss Trufit was sent for. Christie had told her it was Mr. Sebastain gone to nothing but a skeleton, and she dropped her knitting, and hurried into the room.

One glance was sufficient. She managed to take his hand, and say—"My dear boy!" and then the tears rained down from the old eyes, and Miss Priscilla cried like a baby.

Christie had gone weeping to Nurse Mary, and she at once appeared at the scene of action. Her horror she kept to herself, like a sensible woman, and busied herself for his comfort. His wraps and boots were removed, and he was put on the couch in the sitting-

room. He did not make any show of resistance—he was past that.

After he had lain a short time, and taken some nourishment, he began to talk to Miss Trufit and Renie, who sat near, the former knitting, as usual, the latter pretending to make a pen-wiper, but not two wafers did she stitch on in half-an-hour. She could not with him there—the shadow of her idol—and death ready to take him. She felt, if she missed looking for a second, that he might be gone out of her reach for many a year, perhaps for ever.

"I knew you would be shocked to see me so changed, but I felt that if I did not come at once it would be too late. I did not get better abroad, so I concluded that cure, or even improvement, was out of the question. My illness commenced soon after I got there, and I worked very hard ; but I don't fancy it made any difference."

"But you must not be downhearted, my dear boy; we shall soon hear you say you are better, what with rest, good nursing, and sea air. You are too young to be an invalid."

He smiled.

"But not too young to die, Miss Trufit!"

The old lady vouchsafed no reply, but left the room to see about his fire. He turned to Renie, who sat like a Spartan, enduring it all in silence.

"No, not too young; I wish it had come sooner. Miss Rudkin, do you know, I have fretted my heart out over there about *her;* she is to blame for it all. I *know* I shall never get better, the doctors told me so, and advised me to go home; and this is all the home I have. I have no claim upon you, yet I come here."

Renie was tempted to tell him that he had a claim, that they were own cousins; but she dared not. His mother had made her

promise never to tell him or anyone. And, undoubtedly, it was best; it would only have harrowed his feelings.

He was, indeed, dying. Doctor Owen shook his head, after seeing him, and said—"Poor fellow!" Every one was shocked and sorry; the gay, merry artist had been such a favourite with all.

He could only crawl down the stairs, with the help of nurse and Miss Trufit, to the sofa. It was entirely his own desire to do that; he had a great dislike to being confined to bed. He liked lying there listening, and talking a bit when he felt able. And then he had a great many visitors. He asked Lucy to bring the baby, and she accordingly did so. The little thing behaved very prettily, and the poor sick fellow was delighted. He asked Renie to paint her when he was gone. After that, Lucy either sent or brought her every day that was fine.

Whenever he and Renie were alone he spoke of his affairs. One day he told her about his funeral.

"I have only been able to save fifty pounds, Miss Rudkin, what with one thing and another. But you must bury me very inexpensively, please, somewhere about here; I should not like to be taken away, you are all so kind to me."

During these talks he rarely required any answering. It was well he did not, for Renie never could have controlled her voice. Remember, she loved him with her whole soul, and yet she must say nothing, and watch him slowly die. Was ever such a service required before?

When his luggage arrived, there were some pictures amongst it which he made Renie promise to sell, and keep the money. There was also the face done by herself, and which he now returned to her.

"It has comforted me many a time, Miss Rudkin; the eyes seemed to smile at me."

He had now been at Fern Cottage nearly a fortnight, carefully tended by all. But he got no stronger, and frequently the delicacies prepared by Mary could not tempt his bird-like appetite. The old woman would stand over him as a mother might have done.

"Now, sir, do try just a mouthful; do, dear!"

"I can't, Mary; I feel sick," and he looked at nurse till her eyes filled.

His gaze was so beseeching at times; he actually seemed to be becoming a child again. They all saw he was sinking fast, but it was not till one Tuesday evening that the lamp went out, and left one in darkness so dense and long that there seemed to be no dawn. They were expecting the end, yet when it came it found them all unprepared.

He said he felt easier, his chest was not so

painful, and earnestly entreated Miss Trufit to go and see Mrs. Howard, who was not well. He should be taken excellent care of by Miss Rudkin and nurse. So Miss Trufit set forth shortly before tea, saying she should return before he went to bed.

He chatted pleasantly over tea, and then Renie sent the tray away, and seated herself in the window with her work. He talked of his false love in a tender, forgiving tone, and once Renie fancied she saw a tear on his lashes. Nurse came in with some barley-water, and he told her he felt better. The old woman eyed him critically, and after a bit set the glass down and left the room.

A little more talk, and he fell into a soft sleep, with his beautiful face to the light. The sun began to set on the tree-tops, the red glory shone full on his countenance, and tinted it with flashes of red and gold, and yet he slept.

Then the sun began to sink; softly it kissed each feature of that sleeping face before it went to rest. A peaceful smile ripples over the mouth, the lips form one word: "Mother!" and he awakes. There is a wondrous light on the face he turns to Renie.

"Miss Rudkin, I have had such a beautiful dream; that face is no longer in the trees; she is quite close to me, and it is my mother. I feel so happy. Would you mind kissing me before I go?"

She is down on her knees beside him.

"Oh, Rufus, my darling! stay! stay! I cannot live without you!"

The eyes light for a second, and he whispers—

"God bless you, Renie!"

He is sleeping again, but there will be no waking; he is climbing up the golden way into that City whose gates shall not be shut at all by day, and where there shall be no

night. He cannot be roused by the passionate words of the kneeling girl; her love cannot reach him; she may speak with safety now. Hushed to all sense and sound he lies; his spirit rising upwards mid the rays of light. Will no faint breath of comfort be wafted to that yearning soul? Must she wither slowly day by day? See, she drags herself up, and bends over him; she may touch him now, it is not forbidden; gently she lifts the chesnut curls off the clammy brow, and her fingers wander over the marble face.

Now she kisses him; she might not kiss him in life, but she may in death. What a privilege! My God what a sacrifice! Her all is gone, and she is left more lonely than the traveller in the desert.

She cannot recall one kiss or smile of love given to her, he cared nothing for her, and yet she is his only mourner. She would have slaved and toiled day by day to have kept him.

One prayer had been answered—that he might be with her at the last—he had come home to die! And with that she must be content.

Darkness set in, and still she stayed by him; he had never been hers till now, and she had a powerful longing to keep him. If she told the news they would flock in and take him away from her, and shut him out of her sight. So there she sat, watching him and kissing his cold lips, till she could not see the dearly-loved face for the night-clouds that drifted through the heavens. Then she tottered to the door.

"Mary, Mary, will you bring a light?"

The old woman brought one, and holding it to the form on the couch, exclaimed—

"He's dead, Miss Renie, he's dead!" she imagined her mistress did not know.

"He fell asleep, Mary," replied the girl, slowly.

"Ah, me! ah, me! so young to die! He

must have gone off in his sleep like a baby. He is not distressed, he looks lovely."

"Never mind talking, Mary," gasped Renie, in her anguish. "When Joseph brings Miss Trufit home you had better ask him to help you carry him upstairs."

Renie felt her way to the dark drawing-room, and sat down. There was a rush of the sea in her ears, and she felt so perfectly alone there in the still room. Sometimes the idea crossed her mind—was it real? Then the hushed sounds in the house told only too faithfully of the awful presence therein—Death.

Days dawned and ended, and Renie kept no count. It appeared to her to be one long night since she watched the sun set—she had not slept—and on the Saturday they buried him, the true owner of those noble lands could it only have been proved, had Renie only been able to proclaim the secret intrusted

to her—in a quiet corner of the churchyard. But there was wisdom in the decree; had he known the secret of his birth, it might have added bitterness and regret to the parting.

A pink thorn overhung the grave, and on one low branch amid the fragrant blossom a wren had built her nest. There, where the sun lingers longest, and the grass grows softest, sleeps Rufus Sebastain, under the pink thorn.

Time dragged on, with weary, heartless steps; things ran again in their usual grooves, no one came to disturb the peace—the strife was at an end.

But eager to go home was one worker, as she toiled on day after day; her life was dreary—her all had been called away.

Years have gone by since those figuring in this story lived, the place is changed. Where the home of the proud Rudkins stood stands now an hotel. Fern Cottage is a butcher's

shop; its young mistress was laid to rest after the pink thorn had bloomed seven times.

She had listened and waited, watched and hoped, and never heard but one cry—"God bless you, Renie!"

Down through yonder meadows, down by the river's side, comes a familiar sound, so joyous and free in its ceaseless chatter, dashing the silver spray right and left. Oh! how I wish our sorrows could be laid on thy breast, old friend; to be scattered away, as round and round thou goest, under the sunbeams, under the moonbeams, flinging thy music into the winds; watched by many an envious eye. Standest thou still? No, never! O, Mill-Wheel! my heart to thee!

END.

LOST.

A TALE.

BY HELEN DICKENS.

LOST.

I wonder if this night's ever going to close in? It seems not. I am tired of looking at the garden and green fields beyond, tired of hearing Epper tell Bobby, fat old thing, to "gee up" at the end of each drill.

I wish darkness would come. I have got something in my mind this evening, something that belongs to long ago, the light and green fields. Something that I want to shut out, a something that is mightier than I, and will not be banished. Candles and curtains won't help me, and yet I want them; it is like a poor sick creature's fancy. I am an

invalid, not of body but of soul; it is a sickness that is part of my life, and yet I am not used to it and never shall be.

Nothing is left me but to go over the old beaten ground step by step. That one track is my constant companion, and, God help me! it is back. My life seems to have stopped at one spot like a clock that has run down, and I cannot wind it up because I have lost the key. I live because I cannot die, not because I enjoy life, it is nought to me. I feel not its cold, I feel not its heat; the very fruits are tasteless to me.

My God! My God! how long is it to last? Am I never to be released?

Oh! for but one day's oblivion, one little hour of respite. I think I will just put down my constant cry, "Garthorne." It does not look anything now it is down, and yet how it feels to me; it is my song night and day, like the ceaseless sea. I hear nothing through

the long long nights but "Garthorne;" when I go to church all the preacher says is "Garthorne," it comes borne on the very air I breathe.

And yet it looks nothing on this paper, and why? because there is no background. I will put one, it will keep me still for a bit; I will put life into my cry and show you what I was with Garthorne and what I am without him. I have counted, and I find my clock stopped four years ago on the 16th of July. Who am I? and what am I? are the next questions to be answered. I am Mag—I suppose I was christened Margaret—Willoughby, spinster, aged 24. Young I think I hear you say? Decidedly, reader, and yet I cannot recollect when I laughed last. I am going back hand over hand up the rope of life, and having reached the light I will look at myself for your edification reader. I am a child of ten, rather slight in figure, and fair with

light frizzy hair, that ought to have curled, such being the intention of my mother and nurse, but being like its owner, perverse, it refused, and hung in a tangled disordered mass down my back instead. I had a nose and mouth like most other children, the only thing at all peculiar about me being my eyes. They were large and of a dark grey colour, and caused me not a little sorrow and annoyance. They had a determined and disagreeable way of fixing themselves, that caused my Aunt Elizabeth to solemnly assure my mother that "Margaret had worms." For a short space of time I daily expected the worms to pop out of them, and kept them shut as much as possible; but after a bit I got wiser by dint of questioning my nurse, and thanks to her finished education I discovered that worms did *not* reside at the back of the eyes. My father I do not remember; my embraces have always been bestowed upon

my mother, my stepfather, Mr. Russell, and Aunt Elizabeth. But they tell me I am very like my father, who was a poor, hard-working, struggling doctor in the village of Hadden, Lancashire. A fever visited Hadden soon after I was introduced to it, and carried off my father.

The Revd. James Russell buried my father, in return for which my mother married him. I am second to none in the house on account of the presence of Master Herbert Jordan Russell, a spoilt little monster of fifteen. If he had only dared I believe he would have drawn every tooth in my head by this time, and it would have been quite agreeable to his papa and mamma. Every single thing the little wretch does is put down to an "inquiring mind." They have not decided yet what he is to be; "it is such a difficult matter to tell what he has the most talent for." In that I agree with them, and my

advice is to keep a vigilant watch on the toes of his boots, for *his* speciality is just as likely to appear there as any where else. Waiting such an interesting event, I should purchase him an annuity, as being the most likely thing he'll ever want.

But there is one blessing attending him, and that is that his papa and mamma, and everyone else in the Parsonage, are so taken up watching and thinking about Herbert that they quite forget me, and I am left in peace. My father died without a will, but my mother is generous enough to allow me the sum of forty pounds a year to clothe myself on and pay every other expense. I find it plenty, because I am apt with my fingers, and nearly always trim my bonnets and hats. Therefore, I keep a sum in my cash-box that if named would rather astonish you. My education was derived at school, not at home, and there I made many friends. I believe in Fate, say what people may.

Amongst my companions, there, is one Gertrude Harley, who will never be forgotten by me, for it was at her house I met my fate. Her home is some few miles out of London; they live in good style; her father is a merchant of some sort, and, unlike mine, rich. Gertrude is pleased to be fond of me, and what is more, faithful to me, which is a rarity in girls' friendships. I don't know how we came to be such friends, for our positions are widely different; but it was decreed by fate.

One autumn I went to stay at The Elms. I was seventeen, and had left school a year. Now I come to the queerest part of my story, and I don't ask you to believe it. You can do as you choose; I simply tell it as it occurred.

One night, about three weeks after I arrived at The Elms, I had a strange dream, which made an extraordinary impression on me. I dreamt I was going along some road

in a carriage in evening dress, and by my side sat a man, the like of whom I had never seen before. We neither of us spoke; I was filled with wonderment, for I *knew* the man at my side to be my husband, though we had never exchanged a single word. In the midst of my surprise I awoke. I was not addicted to dreaming, and this dream took hold of me. I could not forget it, and I could not banish the man's face. It appeared to me at every moment, and haunted me till I was literally terrified. I had never seen such a face before, and it seemed determined I should not forget it. At last, in desperation, I drew it on a piece of waste paper, and having done so I hoped I had, like the cobbler, laid my ghost. A week passed by, and the next Sunday, or the next but one, we attended church as usual. We were early, and just as the service commenced I raised my eyes and met those of the original of my

dream. A curious, nay, an awful feeling, passed over me, and I shivered from head to foot. I cannot describe it, but I shall never forget it while I live. He, too, was strangely moved, and, bending to the old gentleman at his side, he whispered something, which I felt to be, "Who is she?" and indicated me. The old gentleman shook his head, as much as to say, "I don't know." We stared at each other in speechless horror; we knew we had met before, but "in the land of dreams." I felt as if I had found something I had been looking for. True, I had been seeking him all the week; I expected to meet him, though I had not the remotest idea where. I felt strangely peaceful; we seemed to be holding silent converse, and I needed nothing more. But presently the others rose, and I rose too, and walked out of the church. But not alone, there was an invisible being at my side, so close to me that it seemed to fill the

very air that brushed my cheek. At dinner the stranger was named, but no one knew him; indeed, the family he appeared with were unknown to the Harleys, except by name; they had only lately taken a place on the outskirts of the village. For several Sundays he came to church, and then some report got circulated that he was a baronet, and a married man. I listened, but I did not believe. I saw him at times walking in the road before The Elms, but I said nothing; there was a spell upon me that made me hold my peace. Remember, reader, I was young, and not skilled in such matters, but our eyes spoke to each other as tongues never could. At last I returned home, but not as I had left. I had awakened to a new life; that unknown man was part of my existence; he had grown to my soul, and he held my fate in his hand. Things had changed at Hadden, so it seemed to me, but the truth was, I had

changed—not circumstances. I felt none of the many slights, I did not see or hear half that passed; they had not power to reach me. And yet I knew not his name. Call it madness, call it anything you will, I do not care. Each day I expected and watched for him—my love—and as each night closed in and he came not, I said to myself it will be to-morrow. My life was one long to-morrow. Meanwhile I grew both in mind and body, and frequently took myself to task for my folly. But I could not get quit of the feeling of the knowledge that I and that mysterious stranger were one. I knew the power he had over me, that if he had beckoned to me I should have got up and followed him to the end of the world willingly. Three years went by, and we never met; I had no other love; I dared not have married, loving him so. It rained in due season, and fruits and flowers sprang up. I tended and looked at them; I

knew he did; he wore a flower in his brown top coat that day in church. The hay-time came, the second crop, and I spent a good deal of my time out of doors, regardless of my skin. It was about this time that the news of Miss Ireland's engagement was made known. The Squire of Hadden is Joachim Ireland, a good-looking hearty old man, and this Miss Ireland is his granddaughter, the child of his only son. Herbert was the first to tell the gossip, and I am afraid I did not evince a becoming share of interest. To tell the truth, that Miss Ireland was a thorn in my side, and had been from a child. Summer after summer I had sat and looked into the great high pew and wondered what was the difference between Miss Ireland and me. I had marvelled why I was not born a squire's daughter to sit in a comfortable pew with a cushion at my back and wear pretty hats, instead of being made the fright I was, poor

child, and the daughter of an obscure county quack. I could not see much difference between us, as far as appearance went. My hands and feet were just as small and well-shaped, my teeth as white and even, my eyes as clear. And yet there was a difference, and that difference was our positions. Could I have pulled her down to my own level, I question who would have looked the best. But I could not, and I just hated her for her superiority. I never went admiring their gardens or poking round; I could not see the reason for the distinction, and I would not make it. I did not envy them their house, or lands, or position, but I would not bow to them, they should not pat me on the head. Let them keep their place, I'd keep mine, but no patronising for me. I will never cringe to man, woman, or child, for which I have always been called disagreeable. There is, or was, a grand flower show held every year at

Hadden, under the distinguished patronage of Joachim Ireland, Esq. And a part of his park or a field adjoining it is given for that purpose. That field is near the old church, near to my father's grave. The village is alive that day, and under the fine old trees and close by the tombstones stand nut barrows and orange stalls. One or two of the commoners of the village stand at the gate and take the tickets, or run about to obey the directions of the peevish old squire or his bloated son. The people pass in and take a survey of the fruits and flowers, and then a subdued stroll through the grounds thrown open to the public by the kindness of Joachim Ireland, Esq., and gape over the new hurdles at the Ireland family, who are strutting on the lawn to show themselves. The fine old hall stands in the midst, with its blinds drawn down, an emblem of their greatness; both it and its inmates are fenced off from the public

like game from yard fowls, and the whole thing from beginning to end says—"Look, but don't touch."

The Irelands had just returned from London, and the Flower Show was announced for the following Wednesday. It was a broiling day, and the hay lay in the fields—there was no danger of rain.

"It scented the air, and I stayed out all day playing about the cocks like a child. About half-past two Herbert came up arrayed in a top hat and lavender gloves.

"I say Mag, ain't you going to the Show?"

I had forgotten all about it till I saw the young swell.

"No, I am not; you know that I never go; besides my bonnet wants doing up. That mauve has faded with the hot sun."

He grunted—

"Pity that; because Miss Ireland's catch is sure to be there walking her out."

"I care nothing for that. I suppose he has a nose on his face like most other men. There's the garden gate. Go along, Herbert."

He sped off after his papa and mamma, and the dust rose over the hedge in clouds as the carriages rolled past. I sat still and chewed bits of hay, and congratulated myself that I was not going to the show.

Long after the carriages had ceased to pass I rose, and proceeded to the Parsonage to dress. I did not know who might return to dinner. The field I had been in was a large one, and belonged to Farmer Jack. It ran along the Parsonage garden and past the church, just where the entrance to the show was, and the band could be heard distinctly. I took care to make myself neat, and put on a muslin dress with a pale green sprig, but that was hardly discernible, owing to repeated washings, so I may as well say it was white.

Having rather a full figure, I wore a black velvet sash and band to reduce my size. I never was a beauty; but, Heaven help me, I was different then to now. The time went on, and six o'clock arrived, and with it dinner.

Mamma brought back some Mr. Neilds, and his sister, a long lean woman, awfully precise. Mr. Neilds, or Ocky (short for Octavius), as his sister called him, was deaf, and likewise lean. He was resplendent in a pair of sixteen shilling washed trousers—consequently ever so much too short for his spindle legs—and cleaned gloves.

Dear Ocky was pleased to be most amiable to me, and I could not shake him off. I eyed him with no favour, but kept drawing comparisons between him and my nameless Apollo, till almost provoked to mirth.

At last I heard Mr. Russell order the phaeton round to convey them to the train, and after bidding them adieu, I betook my-

self back to the hay-field to have a soothing stroll and get my ruffled plumage down. I did not know it, but I walked like a martyr to the stake. I, of my own free will, went out that summer's night to meet my fate. Oh! God, shall I ever forget it? Shall I ever get the scent of that new mown hay out of my nostrils? I went to the field and sat down; but I got tired, and rising stepped over the low wall into the churchyard. I went to my father's grave and wantonly read and re-read the simple inscription—

"In Memory of
WILLIAM WILLOUGHBY,
Who departed this life, November 3rd, 1850,
Aged 34 years."

Presently there rose a sound, it was the cracked voice of an old woman who, standing by her sweet stall, was offering everything at "eight a penny."

The show was over long, the shades of

night were creeping round, and the police were clearing the neighbourhood of all and every species of vagabond and hawker. I watched them wheel their barrows off, and then I strolled round the church to the back by the little gate at which the Hall family always entered—it opened into a quiet lane in connection with their grounds. I leant on the wall, the brave old oak and beech trees waving gracefully over my head in return for the cooling breeze that agitated them.

I fell into a reverie, and the theme was, to use Herbert's expression, "Miss Ireland and her catch." They had seen the great individual at the show, and he was alike great in name and great in person. Mamma said he was the handsomest man she had ever seen, Mr. Russell called him a very fine fellow, and Herbert was lost in admiration of the length of his beard and width of his shoulders.

This favoured individual was named Lord

Garthorne Vule. I commenced to speculate on his appearance, and hugged myself when I thought of my love. He was so beautiful in my eyes, though his neck was too short and his shoulders rather too high. I knew he was not perfect, and yet I saw no beauty in any other man. I did not know what spot on God's earth bore the impress of his foot, yet I felt that wherever he was he was mine, mine by a decree that was not human, mine by a right which is nameless. The three long years that had passed had not tended to deteriorate my mad love, they had given it time to grow, and its intensity was such that it was actually the mainspring of my existence.

Such I was as I leant on that wall in the twilight, a strange combination of fate and originality. I had no bringing out, and very little bringing up. I had no introduction into society. I stepped into it, such as it

was, one day as a matter of course. Previous to that I seem to have been in a state of coma, and the only thing I did during that time was to suck up every particle of information about anyone or anything, bad or good, that came in my way. Consequently when I did emerge from my shell I was pretty well primed. The first object that attracted my attention was that man, and like an inexperienced fool I let my whole soul go out to him. Why was he thrust across my path? I could have lived for ever on in my own way contented.

Why did not my eyes open on something I could have secured, and not a being high above me?

Was it to pay for the sins of my father or mother, or my own, that I have been so punished? Well, surely it is paid now! Surely I have paid my due in full? Those who doubt it, let them look at my weary worn

face and silvered hair, and then let them ask themselves whether the account is settled? But I must drag my tired memory back, and tell you what came to me that sweet night. My love. Aye, yes, he did; it makes my head reel now to think of it. I stood still dreaming, when voices became audible, and wove themselves into my dream. It was a woman's voice, a sweet one, too; and it was saying—

"You will bring me them, some day, won't you? I should so like to have them."

A man's voice then replied—

"Yes, certainly, I'll bring you some; but I had no idea you would care for such trifles."

They were now close under the wall, in fact our heads almost touched. It was Miss Ireland and—my love. I felt my heart cease beating, and I became as one frozen; I could not have moved to save my life. My

gaze was rivetted on the handsome face; I don't know that I made any sound, but suddenly he glanced up, and our eyes met. I saw him reel like a drunken man, and catch at the rugged wall. I remember hearing a female's voice, which I supposed belonged to Miss Ireland, and then I remember no more for a bit.

I conclude I fainted, for when I came to myself I was kneeling on the damp grass, clasping a tombstone with both arms. I did not make any attempt to rise; I knelt there drinking in my sorrow.

I believe ten minutes elapsed, and then I heard someone very heavy running down the lane; the little wicket flew open, and he came in. He was not long finding me, no doubt my white dress helped him. Two strides and he was at my side, and had lifted me up. He took my face between his hands, and looking at it said—

"At last."

It was a queer greeting for two who had never spoken; but it was all sufficient for me. I saw his lip quiver as he bent and kissed me. He never asked my leave, and the devil rose within me, and I burst from him.

Did he think, because I was a poor girl, that I would allow him to kiss me at his will?

He followed me, and holding out his hand, said—

"Forgive me, I forgot; but, ah, I have sought you so long, and now it has come too late. We love each other, I know we do; and I am pledged to another. Who is to blame for this? Where have you hidden yourself all this time?"

"Nowhere; I have been here."

I saw a smile cross his face. I forgot that "here" was an out-of-the-way place, that he

with his money and friends might wander about for ever, and never come to the little village of Hadden. It was almost the Land's End to him, mighty man. Mighty devil, with his fascinating face, if I had never seen him I might have married some good striving young fellow, and been happy instead of hankering after forbidden fruit. But now it was impossible; his image was engraven on my heart, the sting had entered my very soul.

He caressed me, and kept on a plaintive song ill suited to his immense stature; but some of the biggest men are the greatest babies. He stroked my hair, saying—

"Ah! my little love, you are all to me. Why, why am I not free?"

Suddenly he exclaimed, grasping my shoulder tightly—

"Mag, say you'll have me, and I'll give Miss Ireland up, cost what it may!"

The mention of my rival's name roused me, and the temper within me. I sneered, though my heart was cold and aching.

"So you are engaged to Miss Ireland; the great lady before the poor girl, of course. Could you not have waited; you say you love me? Or did you make inquiries about my family? You are a lord, I am no one. It could not be, our positions are too opposite; I have been a fool. You need not give up Miss Ireland, and break her heart."

He stamped savagely.

"Break *her* heart, and how about yours? I am to conclude, then, you don't love me?"

This was too much for me, I could not stand it. Not love him! Then I was not living. Miss Ireland's heart, indeed; what did she care about him? what was her love to mine? She had not lived on it three long years; she was gay and had change, but I had no change—he was my all, my love, and

to think she was to have him, *my* idol, and kiss him at her will.

It was quite dusk, but I could see his eyes fixed upon mine when I looked up, and his lips were firmly clasped. I was bold perhaps you think, reader? Don't be rash in your judgment.

The quarter of an hour passed together had done as much for us as a week would do for others. Mine was a desperate case, and having my all at stake made me regardless of propriety.

"Yes, I do love you, and you know it; knew it the first time we met in Wilton Church. Do you think, because I am poor and of lowly birth, that I cannot love? it does not require a peer's daughter to do that."

"You are severe, Mag. But you do love me, so that's all right; now marry me."

"No," said I, starting back; "no, it can-

not be—I see the mistake, but I did not know you to be a lord. I believed you to be some country gentleman, and that I could aspire to. There is nothing for us to do but part, Lord Vule, and go our widely different ways; you'll mary Miss Ireland, and I'll—"

"And what will you do?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, just listen to me a second. There is a good deal said about woman's mercy; do you think you are showing any to me, Mag? I tell you, I love you dearly, and ask you to be my wife, and you say no, and cast me off, yet loving me. You don't know what you are doing, child; you will be sorry for it some day, Mag. If you love me as I love you, you cannot live apart from me."

"You are wrong, Lord Vule; I can and will."

"Drop that confounded Lord Vule; call me Garthorne. I wish to heaven I had been

born a draper's son. Mag, why will you not have me?"

"For the reason I named before—our positions are too opposite. I am not fit to be my lady; I will not be received on sufferance anywhere. And for another reason, I have no faith in a high and low marriage. People should marry according to their station;—it is all very well in novels or on the stage, but it is a great mistake in real life, and does not answer at all. If I wish to be happy I must pick my husband out of the middle class."

"And will nothing induce you?—not love, or money, or position? I would make you as happy as the day is long; don't turn from me, Mag. I never begged for another woman's love, and never will, but I beg for yours."

Yes, I had turned from him, but not for the reason he supposed. I turned because I felt my resolution growing weak while I looked into his face.

Oh, it was cruel, cruel to let us ever meet! When I stand at the Bar, I wonder what sentence the Judge will pass. Will He punish me for all this murmuring when He thinks of how He tried me? It was getting cold, and I shivered. He put his hand on my shoulder.

"Mag, are you trying my patience?"

The touch was kind, and it softened my heart.

"Oh, Garthorne, don't tempt me any more. I see my way clear; let me follow it—don't let me bring a long life of misery on us both. Marry Miss Ireland, and forget me; she is suited to your rank, I am not. But though she loves you, it is not love like mine, she does not know what it means. I loved you for yourself before I knew your name or anything about you. I have thought of you sleeping and waking; you are a part of my life. And now, after years of waiting and watching, I find you, and it is only to say good-bye."

I said more, but it is no use repeating it; it only makes me feel more cold and lonely. He took me in his arms and kissed me, and his cheeks were wet; the big man was actually crying. Presently drops came pattering on the leaves, and on my almost bare shoulders. Garthorne wanted to wrap me in his coat, but I would not. Those drops were angels' tears.

People call it rain, but I know better. Those great, solemn drops that fall so sadly are angels' tears. They were weeping for Garthorne and me that summer's night. He left me at last, and I watched him away. I did not go home; I seemed to have no home but the silent churchyard, where my father lay sleeping. Oh! why did he die that father, and leave his little baby alone? Why did I not go to him when a child? They might have made room for me, I was not very large. I wonder whether heaven will ever be full?

In a day or two Garthorne went away. I

did not see him again, I was ill with a severe cold. But I listened to what they said at table, and I found that the marriage was to take place almost directly. It did take place one morning towards the end of October, at St. George's, Hanover Square, wherever that is, and the papers had a column full about it. How lovely the bride looked, and the dresses, and presents, etc. I read it every word without shedding a single tear, and talked to my mother about it.

At Christmas the family returned to the Hall, and Lady Vule with them, but not Lord Vule. He was out of health, and had gone abroad. The Squire told Mr. Russell that he had gone overland to China, accompanied by his valet only, and that he would not take Lady Vule with him.

I went to church as usual, and sat opposite Lady Vule, who lounged in one corner, with a cushion to her aristocratic back.

It was queer to think of what years had done. In my childhood she had had a long blue feather in her hat, when I had had a bit of shabby black velvet. So it had always been one above the other. She the joy, I the sorrow; and now she had my love. God forgive me if I cursed her as I looked; but it *was* so hard to bear and make no sound. Then came a shock to the village of Hadden, on the 14th of February, the morn of St. Valentine's Day. Lord Garthorne Vule was dead.

That was my valentine.

I thought of his wife, and I was glad. He was mine—never her's. She wore the widow's bonnet. I did not mind that; I knew who was his wife in the sight of heaven. Oh! Garthorne, my lion, my love, you cared for me more than for the high-born lady, and I am glad you are dead! I can think of you now, and it is no sin. In the next world we

shall be equals; there is no rank there, no Stars and Garters, no Lords or Sirs. Thank God! Thank God!

But I feel lonely sometimes, and want my love; the world seems so empty.

Everyone has someone to care for them—I have not. My love was a mistake, for which no one was to blame, and I only suffer. My sorrow is keen; it is lasting. There is a void that however long I live will never be filled up.

It must have been sent to teach me something, something that I ought to try and learn.

Last night Garthorne called me.

I was getting into bed when a voice said, close to my ear, "Mag, are you ready?" and I answered, "Yes; I am coming!"

It pleases me to think he is not so happy in heaven that he can do without me. My darling; my darling that not even my great

love could keep, the world's worth to me. I would go this minute if I could.

Yet I can say with Hope Douglas :—

"God's peace has come upon thee full and sweet,
O, best beloved! thou can'st not hunger more,
Nor can thy soul thirst on that far-off shore,
Sun shall not trouble thee, or any heat;
And God shall surely wipe away thy tears:
But I must lose the face that was my light,
And stretch my empty hands out in the night,
Missing thy tender clasp through all these years;
Yet, when Death's angel comes to set me free,
I know that thou wilt listen for my feet,
Ascending up the golden way to thee;
And long, long woe will seem but moments
And until then I would, though desolate,
Strive to be patient, and God's will to wait."

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